

The Beginning After the End

Volume IV Horizon's Edge
by TurtleMe



THE BEGINNING AFTER THE END

**- VOLUME 4 -
Horizon's Edge**

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Chapter 69

An Unfamiliar Burden

My teeth were clenched the whole time as I willed a hole in the earth below us. Carefully placing Alea's cold, lifeless body into the center, I slowly covered her, using her weapon as a makeshift gravestone

I couldn't even laugh at the sick irony that this dungeon happened to be named the Widow's Tomb...

Wordlessly, I spent some time burying each of Alea's fallen comrades. The once beautiful cave layered with a glossy bed of grass and a pond that glittered like shattered glass now looked like a national landmark of the fallen; the crude mounds of dirt and weapons used as grave markers giving this place an eerie ambience.

After finishing up the makeshift graves, I dragged my not-so-willing legs back to where I buried Alea. Kneeling, I placed my hand on the mound of dirt covering the once famous Lance. She was considered the pinnacle of power here and was no doubt respected and feared by many. However, to me, she was simply a girl, a lonely girl, regretful of the fact that she never had someone to love and have someone to love her back.

As I looked at her in her final moments, a sense of dread dawned on me. She was almost exactly the same as I was from my past life, except she wouldn't be reborn into a different world. With my immediate reincarnation after my previous life ended, I didn't have the chance to even reflect on how I lived. In Alea's last breaths, she had broken down and sobbed, crying how she didn't want to die like this.

"Damn it..."

I rubbed my eyes as tears unknowingly began streaming down my face, indignant in her stead at how her life came to an end.

Sending out another mental transmission to Sylvie, I sighed in defeat when I didn't hear a reply. Slumping back down against the jagged walls Alea and I leaned against; I recalled everything the fallen Lance had informed me of. From the information she

was able to gather, there were a couple of speculations I could make.

One, there were more than just one black horned demon. How many, I wasn't sure. My only hope was that there wouldn't be many. If one of them can easily kill a Lance or gravely injure a dragon like Sylvia, then I was out of my league.

Two, they were definitely after something. I'm not sure what, but my mind keeps wandering back to the egg Sylvie had come from that the demon had called a gem. If they really were after Sylvie, then avoiding them indefinitely wasn't going to be possible.

Three, there was going to be a war in Dicathen. This continent will be in danger and we definitely weren't prepared. When the demon told Alea that there would be a war, though, I felt an underlying tone that the black-horned demons weren't from this continent. Was the new Continent that we just uncovered filled with these demons? I shuddered at that thought. Hopefully that scenario wouldn't come true.

However, the more I contemplated, the more certain I became that there probably weren't that many black-horned demons. If there truly was a race filled with super-powered demons, then they would've already annihilated this continent with ease instead of sneaking around different dungeons and infecting the beasts. They were obviously uncertain whether they could take on this whole continent so they're going about discreetly, at least for now.

What bugged me was trying to guess when the war would be. There was no marked calendar and no way to guess. Was waiting the only thing I could do... what we could do?

A sharp pain in my hands made me realize how hard I was clenching my fists, leaving me looking at the drops of blood running down my forearm.

What I was slowly learning, and what Alea's death reinforced was the realization of how valuable the relationships that I have with my families, with Tess, and with my friends are. What I didn't have in my past life were loved ones I would give my life for to protect. I had that now, but I don't have the strength to protect them; not for what was about to come.

For the amount of potential I have, I was getting complacent. That needed to change.

I recalled Sylvia's message for me after she teleported me into Elshire Forest. Her

message still rang clearly in my head; her voice echoing that I would hear from her again once my core reaches past the white stage.

That was the most certain method that I currently knew of to be able to get some reliable answers on what's going on. I was still unable to break from the threshold of dark yellow stage though. After yellow is silver, and then white... sigh... I still have a bit to go.

*ROOOAAAAAR!!!! *

'PAPA!'

My head perked up as I heard a loud crash soon after from the direction of where I fell. Picking myself up, I dashed towards where Sylvie's voice came from.

I stopped in front of a cloud of dust and called out to Sylvie.

'I'm here Sylv, are you okay?'

"FWWWOOOOOSH!"

I covered my face with my arms as the cloud of dust was instantly blown away, revealing my precious bond in her full glory.

My heart thumped in excitement as I could see my dragon came into view.

Sylvie had become even more fearsome than when I saw her at the Dire Tombs. Her scales aren't glossy anymore like before; instead, they were now a dignified matte black. The two horns she had have grown even longer, going past her snout and another pair of horns protruded underneath them. If she looked crudely fierce back then, the feeling I got now was more of awe. She appeared as majestic as she did deadly. The spikes she had running down her back are no longer there and rather, because of that, she seems more refined. Her gem-like iridescent yellow eyes pierced through me, making me doubt that she was the one who just called me Papa.

'Papa! You're okay!'

Distilling all of the bewilderment that had kept me from approaching my bond, she, once again, lifted me up from the ground with the force of her lick.

“Haha! You got bigger again, Sylv!” I beamed a childish smile. Hugging the snout of my dragon, Sylv let out a deep purr as she rubbed herself against me, and just for a moment, I was able to forget everything I’ve just been through.

Lifting me off the ground with her snout, she placed me on her muscular broad back.

‘Hold on Papa! Let’s get out of here.’ With a powerful snap of her wings a raging gust formed underneath us and we were instantly propelled into the air. For some reason, the sudden force didn’t affect my body as I comfortably rode on the back of my ten-meter long dragon.

During the flight back up, my bond and I caught up on everything that happened while we were separated. She didn’t really understand everything about the demons and the upcoming war but she did get the sense that whatever was about to happen isn’t good.

‘Don’t worry, Papa. Whatever happens, I’ll be with you!’ Sylvie’s innocent response left me chuckling.

Like a narration of a children’s book, she announced a bit about what she’s been up to, which was, not surprisingly, fighting beasts and consuming beast cores. I really needed to be there with Sylvie the next time she trains; I was curious as to what she’s capable of. Sylvie didn’t really know the distinction between the levels of mana beasts so I was left pondering over how powerful she really was.

‘Hmph! I’m really strong, Papa!’

“Haha, I know I know.” Patting the hard scales on Sylvie’s neck, we soon arrived at the entrance of the dungeon.

As we landed in front of the ruined staircase leading up to the surface, I took a glance back to see the hundreds of minion Snarler corpses. Sylvie transformed back into her fox form and leapt on top of my head, taking a couple of spins before perching comfortably on my hair.

Augmenting mana into my body, I lightly jumped from broken stair to broken stair, careful not to collapse the fragile remains of the staircase that was once worn down to an ivory smoothness.

A full moon greeted us as we reached the surface and, as expected, there was no one here. I breathed an outward sigh of relief knowing that everyone else made it back

safely to Xyrus.

It'll be a several hour trek to the nearest teleportation gate so I decided to hurry. However, making sure there wasn't anyone hiding nearby, I released a pulse of wind around me. Taking out the seal from my dimension ring, I carefully inspected it. As I was about to put it on, an image of Alea flashes into my mind. I take out the black fragment of the demon's horn, the horn of the demon that killed her.

Instead of putting on the seal, I took a deep breath and put the seal back into my dimension ring.

My stomach tightened and my eyes narrowed as a churning sensation stirred inside me. No more hiding. I had bigger things to worry about now. I couldn't be bothered with stressing over something like this. This demon horn shard would be my constant reminder for that.

'What's that, Papa?' Sylvie's head popped up as her paw tried reaching for the black shard.

"It's my goal, Sylvie," I grimaced as determination swelled up in the pit of stomach. Patting my bond's furry little head, I began my trip back.



Needless to say, the guard in charge of the teleportation gate looked fairly startled when he saw me. He must've received orders to be on the lookout for me because, as soon as he verified who I was, he began hurriedly making multiple calls using the artifact he had on hand.

Quickly ushering me through the gate, I arrived back in Xyrus feeling a little queasy as Sylvie slumbered on the crown of my head. There was a driver waiting for me on the other side. Giving me a sympathetic smile he tipped his hat before opening the door for me.

My mind wasn't completely there as I kept thinking of the future. For the first time in both of my lives, I felt a heavy burden weighing down on me. The pressure of keeping my loved ones safe; I've never had that even while I was a King. The weight of a country I had no affection for in my previous life couldn't compare to the few lives I would give my everything for in this one.

When I reached the Helstea Manor, I stopped in front of the giant double doors. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to knock on the doors to my own home.

What would my family's expressions be? It seemed like every time I went out; all I did was worry them.

Taking a seat on the top of the stairs, I just let out a sharp, bitter sigh. Looking up at the night sky, I could see the faint colorations that supposedly signaled the coming of festival. The sky turning blue, yellow, red and green indicated when the Aurora Constellate would begin. My eyes focused on a solitary cloud, slow-dancing above me without a care in the world. What an envious position to be in.

"Son?"

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't even hear the door open behind me.

"Hi Dad, I'm back." I gave him a weak smile.

"Why didn't you come in? We heard from the teleportation gatekeeper that you arrived in Xyrus." My father takes a seat next to me when I don't respond.

"Your mother will be fine, Art," he said warmly, gently patting my back.

"I worried you guys again. It feels like that's all I'm really good for nowadays," I chortled, knots churning in my chest as I said this.

I turned my head to my father and see him gazing up at the sky like I was just moments ago.

"She really loves the Aurora Constellate. Your mother may not seem like it, but she's strong, Arthur, even more so than me. If you think that all you've given us are worries, then you're wrong. Both you and your sister have given your mother and I so much more than we could've hoped for."

"I know that you're not like the normal children your age; hell I've known that since you were born. I don't know what sort of destiny you'll be caught up in, but I don't think it'll be anything you can't handle." The skin around his eyes wrinkled as he gave me a reassuring smile.

"..."

“What I don’t want you to do is feel like you’re being a burden on us. All of this guilt that you’re feeling right now, the weight that you’re probably feeling, I want you to come to us so that we can be there for you. I don’t ever want you to feel like you can’t come home, that you aren’t welcome. As long as you have the use of your two legs, I expect you to come home whenever you can and let us love you. That is our right as your parents. Okay?” My father ran his fingers through his trim, auburn hair in a gesture that revealed how he wasn’t used to saying things like this. And just like that, the weight that I felt accumulating inside slowly dispersed.

“Got it, Dad.” I managed a more sincere smile this time and he responded with his signature foolish grin.

“Come on, let’s go home. Once inside, a more ferocious beast than anything you’ve ever faced awaits,” my father whispered darkly before the both of us broke out into a fit of laughter.

Chapter 70

Course of Breakthrough

When we stepped inside the house, the temperature seemed to have suddenly dropped. In contrast to the icy atmosphere, though, my mother's fiery gaze pierced down at me from the top of the stairs, the corner of her eyes struggling to keep her tears from rolling down her cheeks.

"Hello Mother, I'm... back?" Cold sweat permeated through my pores as a pressure akin to an S class mana beast weighed down on my very soul.

I had to admit, I wasn't looking so sharp. My body was a canvas of nicks and scratches and my hair looked like it was probably struck by lightning repeatedly, as if one strike wasn't to its satisfaction. The entire back of my uniform was nonexistent from when it was sandpapered away while falling down the hole.

"Arthur Leywin..." My mother's voice dripped with frost.

Before my mother had the chance to say anything more, a familiar voice instantly broke the tension in the room.

"BROTHHERRR!" My baby sister bolted down the stairs past Mother, while stumbling on the way down, and took a leap into my bosom, her arms immediately clinging around me with the strength of a python on steroids.

"Erk! E-Ellie it hurts..." my voice came out raspy as I gently patted my sister's head.

Sniff "A teacher came and said you... you were lost." *Sniff*

My sister rubbed her face against my chest, while attempting her almost incoherent string of words, as if wanting to burrow herself inside me.

Sylvie stirred awake at this point. With her ears drooping down, she consolingly licked my sister's cheek.

"I know... I'm sorry for worrying you guys... again." I looked up at my mother as I said

this, my voice dropping to almost a whisper.

I could tell by her expression that she was torn between whether to scold me or just be happy.

Maybe she would do both.

My father took this chance to walk over to my mother and gently lead her down the stairs, comforting her.

“There’s a time to be angry, Honey, but now isn’t the time. Look, it’s your son. He’s back.” My father’s soothing voice eased the tension between my mother’s brows. As her expression softened, so did her will.

Breaking down into sobs, she wrapped her arms around me from the side, triggering a chain reaction, thus, causing my sister who was still wrapped around me to begin bawling her eyes out yet again.

My mother’s sobs made her soliloquy almost indiscernible; she seemed to switch between cursing God to thanking him.

“It’s not fair...”

“Why is my son the one that keeps getting so hurt?”

“Thank God you’re safe!”

My father and I made eye contact and he gave me a reassuring half-smile while he gently patted both my bawling sister and mother, both of whom were angrily thumping me with their trembling fists while crying.

Their fists didn’t particularly hurt but each trembling strike seemed to gnaw away at me; the guilt ate away at my insides, as I stood there motionless, biting my quivering lower lip.

It took about a good hour before they calmed down; both my sister and mother reduced to a state of heavy panting and constant hiccups.

Somewhere in the middle of our scene, I spotted Lilia’s mother, Tabitha, peeking from upstairs. I could tell she wanted to come down and comfort my mother and sister but

before she could, Vincent pulled her back, giving me meaningful nod.

Eventually, we got ourselves situated in the living room. My sister's breathing was still erratic to the point of worry while she had her arms wrapped around Sylvie. My mother was a bit better as her swollen eyes probed for any serious wounds before placing a gentle hand on my chest.

"...And let Heaven and Earth heal." As she ended her chant, a soft white glow enveloped my body.

Almost immediately, I felt a soothing warmth covering every wound, even the ones I didn't know I had.

As the healing glow dissipated along with my injuries, I looked at my mother's concentrated face.

I wanted to ask.

Why was it that she could use her healing powers now?

How was she able to heal Dad when he had been struck by the mage on the way to Xyrus? I still remembered her desperately healing my father as he ordered me to take my mother and run. That was before I fell off the cliff.

I bit my tongue and forced a smile. My father was right; I should wait for her to tell me first.

My mother let out a sigh before taking her hand off of my chest. She stared at me, and gave me one more firm, wordless hug.

We eventually began talking about what happened. My father took a brief moment to tell me how Professor Glory had visited and told them what had happened to me before she had to hurry back. All the while, my sister sat wordlessly on the couch, curled up with Sylvie, as she seemingly stared at a particular spot on the ground in front of her.

On my end, I tried not to make a big deal of what transpired for the sake of my mother. I skimmed over the fight with the minion crawlers, telling them how there was just a bit more than we expected.

Both my parents gave me a face that told me they didn't believe it was that simple. They knew me too well.

How much was I supposed to tell them?

My mind lingered towards the fragment of the demon's horn that floated inside the dimension ring I was twisting with my thumb.

The scene flashed through with such clarity, as if plastered into my brain. The dismembered corpses... The river of blood... Alea...

Taking a deep breath, I told them the full story. All of it...

...At least until where I landed

I never understood why those old stiffes from the Council in my previous world used to say 'ignorance is bliss'...until now.

Nothing good would come out of knowing everything I witnessed at the bottom of that dungeon earlier today.

"When Professor Glory came in yesterday during the middle of the night, she was wounded and tired but from her expression, I knew she wasn't even thinking about that." My mother's hoarse voice broke the silence that followed after my story.

"She said that you stayed behind with her to save the class. She told me you were a hero. But you know what? I didn't care." Her voice barely made it to a whisper as she trembled slightly.

"More so than some hero, I just wanted my son to come home without being half dead every time. What if one of these days..." My mother couldn't finish her sentence as tears began streaming down her face once more.

"Art, you're only twelve but why does it feel like I've almost lost you so many times already?" Her voice choked.

"..."

Words failed to form again as I stared blankly at a particular mole on my mother's arm. How was I supposed to respond? Her question felt like a trap with no right answer.

“Honey, that’s enough.” My father reached for Mother’s hand and grasped it tenderly.

I realized that, just like how I’m growing, my parents are growing as well. My father’s once immature, haughty side had been molded into a mature and gentle demeanor. He was still the same father that cracked jokes, but he had a layer of depth now that most likely came with raising my sister.

My mother had always been on the mature side but through the years she’s become a bit more refined. Associating with the Helstea house and with Tabitha and Vincent’s friends had made her more elegant, but right now, she seemed to have reverted back to an earlier age when her emotions weren’t as stable.

I didn’t blame her. I would probably be tempted to lock Ellie indoors if she ever came home even half as wounded as I had been earlier today.

The rest of the conversation went by a bit more comfortably. Tabitha and Vincent came down after noticing that things seemed to have been settled. I hadn’t seen them in quite a while so after greeting them, we all took some time to catch up.

Ellie was nodding off to sleep so I carried her to her room, leaving Sylvie with her. Even in her sleep, my sister still sniffled from crying so much. Through the night, she didn’t say a word. I knew that this episode had been pretty traumatic for her. A professor actually visited them, after all, and told them that I was missing. If not for the ring that my mother wore telling her that I, at the very least, had not died, she would’ve already fainted.

It might actually have been worse for my mother, in this case, to have the ring. All she could do was stare at the ring, waiting for it to notify her that her son had died. What kind of mother would be fine after going through that?

Getting to my room, I slipped out of my tattered uniform and washed up. I planted my face directly against the current of the warm, gushing water, almost wanting it to erase what had occurred earlier in the dungeon. Alea’s last moments kept pounding into my skull as a constant reminder of how weak I was.

Knock *Knock*

“Can I come in?”

“Sure,” I replied.

My father entered, closing the door behind him before taking a seat next to me on my bed.

“Arthur, don’t mind too much what your mother said tonight. She may have said she didn’t want a hero but we are both proud of what you did back there in the dungeon. Knowing that my son isn’t someone who’d abandon his allies is something I can take absolute pride in.”

I always knew when my father was serious because he would call me by my full name instead of my nickname - Art.

“I don’t know what really happened back there in the dungeon and I won’t ask, but just know that I’ll support whatever you decide to do.”

I struggled to swallow the knot that formed in my throat upon hearing my father’s last sentence. It was supposed to be a supportive statement but all I felt was a sour taste in my mouth.

Without giving me a chance to respond, my father stood up and ruffled my hair. Opening the door to my room, he turned his head and gave me a goofy grin before walking out.

I didn’t immediately go to sleep when he closed the door behind him. Instead I sat cross-legged and began doing something I haven’t done seriously in a long time - training.



The dark yellow core inside the pit of my sternum had cracks all over it, signaling that I was about to break through soon.

The various noises of the night were drowned out as I keenly focused on the activity going on inside me. Wind, Earth, Fire, Water... these were the basic elemental attributes that mana had, but that was it; they were merely attributes.

When mana circulates inside the core and throughout the body, it wasn’t distinguished as anything other than simply mana. Like the ki in my old world, it was formless, attributeless, and pure. Over time, mana will adapt to its surroundings and form attributes. For example, near regions in the north where there is much more snow and

water, magic pertaining to those elements will obviously become stronger due to the attributes of the mana. The mana, depending on the environment, slowly changes and contains attributes to better exist there.

As mages, we are able to absorb, purify and guide mana with our will into different shapes and forms that we call spells.

The purer our mana core is, the higher the capability we have in manipulating the existing mana inside us. As to how well one utilizes their mana, that will depend on how creative, sharp, and skillful the mage is when fighting.

The whole aspect of elements lies in the underlying fact that everyone had elements that they are naturally more sensitive to; being able to manifest and shape that pure, attributeless mana into an element being the cause.

Alea, along with the other Lances, were most likely white core mages, capable of causing widespread devastation if they truly wished to. Yet, Alea had been so easily defeated and killed by that black-horned demon.

Every pore in my body took part in absorbing the surrounding mana as the mana inside my core swirled fiercely.

Crack *Crack*

I imagined the sound of outer layer of my core cracking as the bright yellow underneath the crumbling outer shell was revealed.

“Phooo...” As I let out a deep breath, I stood up and opened my eyes to stare deeply at my hands. I willed mana out of my body and it began circulating around me.

Letting out an unsatisfied ‘Tch’ I sat back down again and began cultivating once more. It took me almost the entire night to break through when I had been already on the brink anyway.

How much more did I have to train in order to even be on par with those demons? If even a white core mage had to give her life to merely chip off a fragment of the demon’s horn, what stage did I have to get to?

What would happen after breaking through past the white core stage?

Chapter 71

A Confusing Day

I decided to stay home one more day before heading back to school. I was going to come back next week for the Aurora Constellate, but I guess mother and sister developed some sort of trauma, that I was going to somehow get hurt every time I left home.

I knew that I had people to inform but I owed it to them to be there.

As a change of pace, I was determined to spend time with my family, namely my mother and sister. Father left at dawn for work after checking up on me so it would just be myself and the girls. Tabitha decided to tag along and after a rather brief discussion; they wanted to go shopping. It was fairly apparent to me that they wouldn't take no for an answer.

Sigh...

I could at least use that chance to take a detour, after, to Xyrus Academy. I knew that everyone was safe according to what my parents heard from Professor Glory, but I shouldn't keep them in the dark about what happened to me for an extra day. I was also a bit worried about the condition of Tess's assimilation.

I lost count of the many places we visited after the umpteenth store but I didn't dare show my displeasure in front of the girls. While browsing through the stores, I realized how ignorant I was. The fact that the only time I browsed through stores was a bit after I was first reborn into this world, struck me; this, coupled with the fact that I had no noteworthy equipment besides my sword, made me contemplate getting new equipment. I still remembered the time when I was slung on the back of Mother and got to see all of the small tents filled with merchandise back up in the tiny town of Ashber.

Most of my childhood was spent in the Kingdom of Elenoir, more specifically, inside the castle. Even the previous time I went shopping with the ladies, we went directly to the fashion district so nothing appealed to me. There were some items with protective capabilities from either the material it's made from or from runes etched into the

inside, but nothing powerful enough to catch my interest.

“Aunt Helstea, are there stores where they sell something that can help me train faster?” I asked while we were headed inside a store that specifically sells only scarves.

“Hmm? You mean elixirs? Of course.” Tabitha gives me a confused look as if I had asked some sort of trick question.

I’ve never used the elixirs here, but if they were anything like the drugs some practitioners used in my old world, then I didn’t want to get anywhere near them.

“There’s actually a small elixir and medicine shop around the corner if you want to go take a look while we shop for some scarves...”

That was all I needed to hear before strategically bolting out of the store.

“Thank you! I’ll meet you in front of the store!” I shouted while running out after carefully dropping the bags I was assigned to carry.

“Kyu!” ‘Don’t leave me!’

I saw Sylvie extend a paw out towards me in a desperate attempt to escape Ellie’s firm hold on her but I just gave her a look of condolence before running off.

‘Your sacrifice will not be in vain,’ I saluted.

After turning the corner as per instructions, my face crumpled up in bewilderment.

This was a store?!

The corner I turned in led me into a narrow alleyway that thugs had probably used to mug unsuspecting passersby. At the end of the narrow alleyway was a dingy shack that even rats would find too revolting to live in. The wooden planks that made up the store looked like it had been painted with moss and fungus as a musty, stale air emanated out, drifting towards me. At least it complemented the sickly green weeds creeping out from the bottom of the store as if even they didn’t want to be stuck there.

WINDSOM’S POTIONS AND MEDICINES

I had to tilt my head to read the etched title on the angled sign, which had been barely

dangling on a single nail.

Did they really sell potions and medicines there? I would be less surprised if they sold bottled diseases and poisons.

“Spare some change, young lad?” A haggard voice startled me out of my stupefied state.

Beside me, sitting down was a pale old man with a hand reached out towards me, palms up.

I immediately took a step back in surprise, instinctively layering my body with mana.

How did I not sense this old man that was almost right next to me?

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost, young lad. I’m but a mere aged man asking for some change.” The old man’s face wrinkles as he reveals a pearly white smile that didn’t match his ragged state.

“Ah yeah, sure.” I reach in my pocket for a copper coin, using the opportunity to take a closer look at him.

With a thick, uncombed bed of pepper-tinted hair that fell down to his slightly hunched shoulders, he looked up at me with his milky eyes. The old man’s wizened face, though, didn’t come off to me as weak and weary, but intelligent and bright, for some reason. I could tell that this man was probably very handsome in his youth, which all the more made me feel a bit disheartened seeing him end up like this.

“Many thanks, young lad.” His gnarled hands nimbly grabbed the coin out of my hand with a speed that surprised me.

Between his middle and index fingers was a coin that was silver instead of copper

Damn! I gave him a silver coin by mistake! That’s 100 copper coins!

“Wait... I meant to give you this...” I reached into my pocket again and when I made sure that this time, the coin in my hand was indeed copper, I looked back up to see that the old man was gone.

“What the...” I stood there, bewildered for the third time in the last five minutes.

My money...

After letting a helpless sigh escape my lips, I took a step forward towards Windsom's potion shack. I reached for the handle of the wooden door that seemed like it would break upon mere contact when I felt a concentration of mana from the copper door knob.

Coating my hand in mana, I wrapped my fingers around the knob, preparing to turn it, when a stiff jolt coursed through my hand and up my arm. Thankfully, the mana protecting my hand helped me from pulling away so I forcefully twisted the knob, opening the door.

Cling

As soon as the door unlocked, the shock stopped as well. Pushing open the creaking door, I'm welcomed by a breeze of something indescribably horrendous. The stench was so strong that it immediately triggered a stream of coughs from me.

"Oh a customer! What can I do for you?" A familiar voice welcomed me.

"You!" I couldn't help but point my finger at him in both anger and confusion. It was the same homeless old man that disappeared after taking my silver coin!

"What brings you in here?" He looked at me with an innocent expression.

Sigh "Can I just have my coin back? I need that money to buy some stuff I need... and besides, you said you were homeless." I stuck my hand out towards him.

"No no... I said I was but a mere aged man. Based on the environment where you met me and by my appearance and demeanor, you assumed I was homeless." He wagged his finger at me in a scolding manner, as if I was the one in the wrong.

"How about this, you can pick one item here for free as a thank you for the present." He answered in a magnanimous manner as he twiddled my silver coin between his fingers, mockingly.

My brows twitched in annoyance but I calmed myself down and quickly took a scan around the sorry excuse of a store.

"Are you sure there are even items here worth a silver coin?" My voice came out with

a twinge of frustration in it.

“Of course! I don’t give this chance to just anyone, you know. You just have to choose carefully.” The old man’s eyes gave off the excited twinkle of a 2nd rate gambler who had a winning hand.

I rubbed my temples to try and calm the boiling rage stirring up inside of me.

The elderly should be respected, Arthur.

The elderly should be respected...

By this time, my nose had become accustomed to the mysterious stench that had the power to drive even the most ferocious mana beasts away. Taking a look through the shelves caked with dust, I became more and more amazed at how this place was still even running.

“Don’t you ever clean this place, old man?” I asked as I slid my finger along one of the shelves. I could probably build a snowman out of dust with the amount collected here.

“Are you asking an aged man like myself to do manual labor?” He gasps sarcastically, putting on a horrified expression.

“Never mind.” I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at this man. I couldn’t gauge him and that made it all the harder for me to trust him.

Making my way past the half-open boxes blocking the path, I go towards the shelves near the back of the store.

While scanning through the various vials and containers filled with either murky liquid or colored pills, I’m startled by a figure sitting on the top of the shelf.

Dammit, what was with this place?

I couldn’t sense anything inside here until it was right in front of my nose.

The figure became more apparent as I focused on it; it was an almost pitch black cat. The only part of its body that wasn’t black were the tufts of white fur in front of its ears, but that wasn’t what caught my attention. It was the cat’s captivating eyes. Eyes that seemed as if it held the universe inside them. It looked like the night sky with

bright twinkling stars sprinkled inside each of its eyes, with its white, vertical slitted pupil glowing like a crescent moon.

As I stayed fixated on the cat's bewitching eyes, the cat peered back down at me from the top of the shelf with a sense of obvious superiority before it turned back and walked away.

Shaking my head, I focused back on the various bottles and containers when a small black box catches my attention.

Picking up the plain box, roughly about the size of something you would store small jewelry in, I tried to open it. With a small click, the hinge comes undone to reveal a small ring inside it. I brought the ring closer to my face when the 'gem' embedded onto the ring suddenly squirted something out towards me.

Instantly I react by whipping my head to the side so the stream of clear liquid misses and lands behind me.

It was water.

"Tch... you dodged it." I turned my head back to see the old man grumbling while still fiddling with my silver coin.

"..."

At this point, I felt like if I stayed any longer I would lose my sanity. First the shocking doorknob... now this squirting ring. This old man sure loved his pranks... even his cat looked down on me.

I was determined though. If I could get anything inside this store for free, I was going to get the most valuable item inside this store.

I must've spent at least an hour inside, just combing through elixirs that I didn't need. Why would a twelve-year-old need an elixir for hair growth?

"Kyu!" 'Papa! I'm here!'

A white blur whizzed past the door that was left open and landed on my head.

"Kuu!" 'Papa, you left me!' Sylvie puffed while smacking my forehead with her paw.

‘You survived, comrade!’ I smiled, rubbing her tiny head.

“Old man, I can’t find anything I...” I began to say but the expression the old man had on his face made me stop. He was the one that looked like he saw ghost this time because even his already pale face became whiter. His milky eyes that sagged down from old age looked like a full moon, his expression stricken.

“We finally found...”

“You okay old man?” I waved my hand in front of him. The shop owner shook his head and let out a cough.

“Yes, I’m quite alright.” His voice quivered a bit, confusing me.

“Anyway, old man, I can’t find anything worth taking back with me, can’t you just give me back my money?” I grumbled as I took one last scan through the store.

“You really don’t have an eye for anything.” He walked out from behind his counter and strolls to one of the shelves front corner of the store.

“Ah, here we are.” Without even looking back, he tosses back to me a small ball about the size of a marble. It was layered in dust but when I wiped it clean, it was clear with specks of different colors floating inside it.

“What is this?” I asked as I brought the orb closer to my face to study it, making sure it wouldn’t spray me with water.

“Don’t worry, it’s something you’re going to need. Now scat. Teasing you bores me,” He shooed me off.

“Okay, okay.” I walked out of the store on my own, taking one last look back at the old shack.

As I strolled out of the narrow alleyway, I spotted the black cat gazing at me and then Sylvie before turning away as if it had lost interest.

Thinking little of it, I reached the intersection out of the alley and turn the corner to see my mother and sister sitting down at a table with Tabitha.

“Hi Brother!” Ellie waved while holding a drink with her other hand.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Mother asked as she put down her refreshment as well.

“I... think?” I scratched my head. I put the clear orb inside my dimension ring to study it later but I couldn’t help but think that it wasn’t anything special.

“Oh really? That store is considered famous for having quite the variety of elixirs and medicines to help with training. Most of the students in Xyrus go there to shop for training materials.” Tabitha got up, picking all of the shopping bags off the floor.

“What? That shabby old place?” I replied, surprised that a bunch of rich snobby brats would go out of their way to shop at a rundown shack.

“Shabby? What are you talking about?” My mother and sister got up too, handing me their bags nonchalantly.

As we walked towards where the alleyway was, Tabitha turns the corner first and pointed towards the shop.

“I wouldn’t say it’s shabby,” She said, a bit confused by my comment.

“Really? If that’s not shabby then I don’t know...”

My jaw dropped along with the shopping bags I was holding onto.

In place of the previous narrow alleyway leading towards the worn down shack, was a marble-paved road laid out towards a three-story building with a gold sign that read:

XYRUS ELIXIRS

Chapter 72

One Fallen

Throughout the rest of the shopping trip, I was in a daze as my thoughts lingered on the transforming alleyway.

Was I already becoming senile?

“Mom... Aunt Tabitha... Do streets in Xyrus... er... move on their own?” The statement sounded as crazy as I thought it would be, even though it came from my own lips.

“Huh? Moving streets?” I could almost see the manifestation of question marks on top of their heads as they gazed quizzically at me.

“Ahaha... Never mind.” I let out a sigh as I looked back at the street where Xyrus Elixirs now stood.

“Did something happen at the elixir store, Arthur?” Tabitha asked.

“You didn’t cause trouble in there, did you?!” My mother followed.

“Do you assume I cause trouble every time I’m away, Mother?”

““Of course.”” Both my mother and sister matter-of-factly responded in unison.

Ouch.

I clutch my chest over where my heart is as I put on a hurt expression, getting a laugh out of everyone.

The rest of the shopping trip went by without any other occurrences that broke the laws of matter or physics. My new DC uniform had to be ordered from school since it was different from the rest of the school’s outfits so I didn’t have anything else that I needed to buy.

My mother and sister, along with Tabitha, once again tried to use me as a human

mannequin. This time, even the teenage store clerks joined in while occasionally taking peeks through the changing room curtains with stares comparable to starving animals looking at fresh meat.

Was it weird that I feared for my life more so on these occasions than when I'm in dungeons?

After hours of shopping, the staggering amount of clothes that filled the numerous bags were probably enough to open up a small store. Fortunately, the driver came by every hour or so to relieve us of the bulk of our purchases.

Out of that pile, the only clothes that belonged to me were a set of sleepwear that I found to be too comfortable to not buy. Supposedly it was made from the wool of a particular type of mana beast.

The sun began its further descend from the edge of the city, reminding me that Xyrus was indeed a floating plot of land.

As we reached the carriage waiting for us on the other end of the shopping district, I noticed that there was a separate wagon attached to the back, holding all the clothes and accessories that we (they) bought.

"Mom, I'm going to stop by Xyrus before heading back home," I said after placing the last of the bags I was holding onto the carriage.

"Why? Is something wrong?" A jolt of panic flashed in my mother's eyes.

"Haha, no. I just thought it wouldn't be good to keep everyone wondering if I were dead or alive," I chuckled.

"Ahh it was just that. Go on then, of course you should tell everyone that you're back safe and sound. Just don't make any other detours on the way back," My mother responded, pinching my nose as she gave me a stern look.

"Gotcha!" My voice came out nasally as I reply.

Sylvie and I watched as everyone climbed into the carriage and left. Waving back to my sister who was yelling that I had to be in time for dinner, I turned and headed towards Xyrus Academy.

Xyrus Academy wasn't too far from the shopping district but it was still a bit of a distance to travel on foot. The sun was beginning to set as we made our way to Director Goodsky's office, which was on the top floor of the second highest building in the school, losing only to the bell tower that served as a useful lookout post for the Disciplinary Committee.

As the Academy towers got closer, I willed mana into my body and jumped up to the roof of a nearby building. Skirting from one building to the next, the view around me became an indistinct blur; the only thing clearly visible being Sylvie, who was racing alongside me, enjoying the breeze.

Making our way to school in silence, my mind began wandering.

It was when my mind wandered that I thought of things that I would rather not think of.

The scene of Alea's last moments flashed through my mind. How she, in all of her glory and mightiness, had still been afraid of dying... dying alone. What if the one that I held in my arms hadn't been Alea but Tess?

My body shivered at the thought.

How was she doing? Was she well? Did her assimilation go through all right? What if something went wrong...

No. You can't think like that Arthur. Positive thoughts...

Gritting my teeth, I willed more mana through my body and sped up.

Without the seal inhibiting me, I felt the deep influence of mana surrounding everything. I ran faster, as fast as I could possibly go, as if I wanted to run away from my own thoughts.

I felt the wind bend to my will, pushing me forward as the earthen surfaces of the buildings almost seem to resonate and keep me in balance by its own will. The moisture in the atmosphere kept me cool and even the small flames from the lamps burnt brighter as I passed them by.

I've noticed before but the more my mana core evolved, the more sensitive I became to mana; I can even go as far as to say I'm becoming more integrated to the mana around me.

I thought back to when I first met Virion. I wasn't nearly as sensitive to mana back then, but even I could tell that, around him, the mana would fluctuate and move to accommodate his presence. Even though both Virion and Director Goodsky were wind attribute mages, the way they influenced the mana around them were vastly different.

For Director Goodsky, the mana formed light breezes of wind that danced around her; while for Virion, it was the opposite. The mana affected the air around Gramps by completely expelling any wind in his vicinity. It wasn't as apparent normally, but when he switched into fighting mode, it felt like even the air was afraid to move near him.

If that sort of phenomenon occurred naturally from just a silver core mage, what would it be like when if they broke through to the white stage?

I felt a twinge of regret when I realized that Alea was the only white core mage I've seen in person so far. Yet, because her mana core was completely shattered by the black spike that pierced through her, even the mana disregarded her, as if she was no longer loved by nature.

"Kyu!" "We're almost here!"

Sylvie's chirpy voice snapped me out of my thoughts as I focused my gaze onto the light coming out of the window of Director Goodsky's office.

'Sylvie, come over here.'

My bond jumps into my arms as I prepare to take off. The academy ground had a barrier that repelled anything with a mana core or beast core that wasn't permitted to enter. It wasn't all that powerful since its main function was to notify if there was everyone passing through unauthorized. I had my DC uniform in my dimension ring, along with the knife that was used for authorization so I wouldn't set off the alarm; Sylvie, on the other hand, might, if she wasn't attached to me.

Concentrating the mana from my core and willing it to take the form of wind underneath the soles of my feet, I leaped off the edge of the building's roof I was on with as much strength as I could muster.

“HAAAAAAAAAP!”

I felt the building almost giving out as a whirlwind sprung up and propelled me higher. I must’ve been about 100 meters in the air when I realized that by the trajectory and speed I was traveling at; I probably wasn’t going to make it all the way to the building.

“HOLD ON SYLV!”

As the anxiety faded, excitement boiled in me as I yelled over the gushing wind that attempted to drown out my voice. Feeling Sylvie’s paws clinging to my shirt, I held her tighter as well.

Biting my lip with concentration, I drove all of my unwanted thoughts away.

Shifting my body weight so that my feet were right underneath me, I turned in midair, and released a roundhouse kick.

Draft Step

I activated the skill I used against Theo that allowed me to accelerate or change direction by using an opposing force of wind to push against my feet. Of course, this time, it consumed a lot more mana as I was basically changing direction midair and at a much greater speed, but I got the outcome that I hoped for.

With the speed boost I got from Draft Step, I was once again on a collision course straight towards the rooftop of the building Director Goodsky’s office was in.

“!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Whether it was due to being drunk from the adrenaline rush, or just me trying to forcefully get rid of the depressing memories that were always haunting me in the back of my mind, I couldn’t help but let out a soul-cleansing roar. The sensation of flying through the air like this was different from when I rode on Sylvie.

Just as I realized that I hadn't quite planned my landing, my body already shot through the air and crashed against several unidentified objects.

*BOOOOM! *

Despite destroying some of the roof, I somehow managed to land on my feet. As

expected of me.

“KYU!!!” “THAT WAS FUN! LET’S DO THAT AGAIN!”

Sylvie was hopping in circles around me as she continued chirping for a second round.

Patting the dust off of my clothes, I looked up.

From the edge of the building, I was able to see a sight I was never able to experience even in my past life.

Xyrus was a floating city; I seemed to have forgotten this fact. I was able to see the edge of the city where isolated clouds floated nearby. I continued to be mesmerized as the rays from the setting sun hit the clouds at an angle that made them appear fiery red. Contrasting against the sun-kissed sky below was a curtain of serene purple that was the atmosphere.

“kyu...” Sylvie propped her head up on the ledge as she gazed silently as well.

The word breathtaking wasn’t just an expression in this case. It was as if Xyrus city was floating on an endless sea of soft marigold that blended harmoniously with the starry night above. The sort of view, that only seemed to be present in fairy-tales, was only made possible due to the city’s high elevation.

I took out a metal necklace from my dimension ring and began mindlessly fiddling with it.

...

For the time that I stood there leaning against the ledge of the building, I was almost able to forget about what happened back in the dungeon; for that brief period of time, the world seemed perfect.

“Quite the view, isn’t it?” A familiar aged voice echoed from behind.

“It is...” I replied without turning back.

“It’s my most treasured spot, you know... I come here often when I want to rest my mind,” She breathed

“Mm.”

“I see you made quite the landing. I’ll have to have Tricia come clean this all up.”

“I apologize for that; I’ll help as well.”

“I heard your battle cry. I suspect the whole school will be wondering what happened.”

“Haha...” I let out a stifled laugh.

“...”

I expected Goodsky to come join us, but instead, she stayed where she was.

“You’re not going to ask me how I’m still alive?” I asked as my eyes stayed glued to the view of the horizon.

“It seemed like it wasn't a good time to ask. I am just glad that you are alive and well.” Goodsky’s voice was quiet, almost feeble.

“I’m well?” I asked myself under my breath.

“Am I well?” I repeated, loud enough for her to hear. A tinge of sadness evident in my tone.

“...”

I looked down at the necklace I was fiddling with. It was a small bloodstained slate of metal attached to a crude chain. Engraved on that slate was a picture of six lances forming a circle; underneath that insignia were the initials:

A.T.

Tracing the letters with my thumb, I scoffed at how much it looked like a dog tag; the same as those worn by soldiers during ancient times in my old world to identify them, just in case their corpses were mangled past the point of recognition.

“...What exactly happened down there, Arthur?” Director Goodsky’s voice was hesitant as she asked this.

Turning to face her with the best half-smile I could muster, I threw the tag over.

“This was what happened,” I replied as Goodsky let out a soft gasp with one hand covering her mouth, while the other held the necklace.

Chapter 73

A Will's Last Breath

CYNTHIA GOODSKY'S POV:

The Council had handed this simple adamantine tag, engraved with the owner's initials, to each of the Six Lances. This idea had actually been thought up by the members of the Six Lances themselves.

When they requested this, they explained to The Council that they needed something made of an almost indestructible material so that even if their bodies were obliterated, the necklace would still be intact and used as a sort of identification. It would be a memento for them; a sort of grim reminder that they could die at any time.

In contrast to the grim faces of the Six Lances, I distinctly remember that The Council had joked with them, asking if there was anything even capable of destroying their bodies past the point of recognition. I recalled chuckling alongside them, even though I knew...

Even though I knew that... There were beings capable of wiping out the crowned Lances off the face of this planet.

But why... why am I seeing this tag so soon. It was too early. They shouldn't be moving this early. I estimated that it would take at least another 15 to 20 years before they would start making their move.

I thought I had time.

I thought we had time...

"Director?" Arthur's inquisitive voice shook me out of my daze.

"Ah yes... Arthur, do you mind if I hold onto this? It would be safe for me to assume that The Council would want this back." I took careful notice of the tone of my voice to make sure I wouldn't arouse suspicion from Arthur. The boy was just abnormally sharp.

“Things are changing aren’t they.” It was supposed to be a question, but by the tone of Arthur’s voice, it sounded like a statement with implied conviction.

Is it wise for me to tell him? Or rather, does he already know something?

“Yes, but it isn’t something for you to worry about. Not yet at least.” I knew my smile and comforting words didn’t reach him.

“Arthur, you may forget sometimes-hell, even I tend to forget at times- but you are still a child; a strong child with limitless potential, yes, but a child nevertheless. Let us adults take on the burden for now; your time will come, whether you wish for it or not.” As I said this, I realized this message was more for myself than for Arthur.

Yes, he is a child. It wouldn’t be fair for him to become involved in the affairs of the Continent... but if he already knows...

“Did you perhaps... see whatever Alea fought against?” I had to choose my words carefully to make sure that my question didn’t give anything away.

“No I didn’t.” The answer was said with full confidence, but for some reason, his answer made me second guess myself.

However, no use in suspecting the boy. It wouldn’t make sense for him to hide anything about an event like this.

Still... I’m glad he doesn’t seem to have figured anything out.

“I see... Well enough about this topic. You must be worried about how everyone is doing.” I let a soft, relieved smile escape as I said this.

ARTHUR LEYWIN’S POV:

The Director’s response somehow left a bad taste in my mouth. She sounded almost... relieved at my response.

“Yeah, how is everyone doing?” In the end, I decided to move on. There was no point in being skeptical of everyone around me. I’ll just assume she skipped out on asking the details for my sake.

“As you may have already deduced, your classmates weren’t all too injured. We had them sent to the guild infirmary hall to be cared for and thankfully, most were able to come to school today. Professor Glory was actually the one that was the most wounded, but she refused to be healed until all of her students were treated. I heard she even paid a visit to your family to notify them of your disappearance after transporting everyone back.” Director Goodsky chuckled.

“That’s good, that’s good... And how is Tess doing?” I inquired.

Goodsky’s face wrinkled a bit as she displayed obvious hesitation.

“Tess... Tess is okay,” She replied. I could tell she chose her words carefully.

“What exactly do you mean by that?” I raised a brow, urging for a proper response, while an uneasy feeling starting to stir within me.

“There were some... complications... in the final stages of her assimilation. Virion is currently looking after her but she has yet to awaken.” Her voice was quiet as she spoke.

“Complications?” My voice came out a bit fiercer than I intended it to be.

“You need to understand that the final leg of assimilation is when the Beast Will struggles the hardest. Right now, Tessia and the Elderwood Guardian are fighting for control. Thus far, there has never been a case where the receiver of the will falls into a coma to this extent. Based on our theory, there seems to be something particular about the Beast Will you gave her, Arthur,” replied Goodsky earnestly.

What... was this my fault? I put Tess in danger...? A flurry of thoughts raced through my mind as I tried to think of an explanation as to why such a thing occurred.

There was something particular about the Elderwood? What was it? Yeah, it was strong, but was it stronger than other S class mana beasts? I wouldn’t know since it was my first time fighting one.

Particular...?

My mind flashed back to the dungeon, and more specifically, what Alea had told me. She had mentioned that the black-horned demons were causing the monsters to mutate and grow stronger.

Was that what happened? Did I give Tess a potentially corrupted beast core? No, I couldn't have. I remember Alea explaining how the beast core of the serpent she defeated had mysteriously disappeared. Shouldn't that have happened to the Elderwood Guardian's beast core as well then?

"Arthur? Are you okay?" Director Goodsky's concerned voice stirred me from the deep abyss of my thoughts.

"Yeah, just thinking," I voiced as my eyes glazed over at the night view of the city.

"In any case, Virion is currently looking after her in your training room. Would you like to go visit them now?" Director Goodsky gave me a reassuring smile.

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"Mmm... then go on ahead because, even I, have not been updated on the situation. Virion has not let anyone in, but I feel like you'll be an exception. I must make a trip to The Council to inform them of what happened." Goodsky suddenly looked infinitely older as she mentioned The Council.

"Is it okay for Grandpa Virion to not be present during The Council meeting?" I asked.

Director Goodsky shook her head before replying, "Virion is in no state to be bothered with this matter when his precious granddaughter is currently unconscious. And besides, him being there with Tess is the only reason Alduin and Merial can stand to be away from their daughter and remain with The Council."

"I see. Okay, well I hope you keep me informed on this matter." I made my way to the door.

"My only concern is that you may have to be a lot more involved this time than you'd wish to be." Director Goodsky breathed a sigh before a gust of wind enveloped her and whisked her away.



As I made my way down by riding the elevator, Sylvie stirred from her sleep.

'I feel Mama.'

As I walked slowly towards the training room that had been assigned to me, my feet seemed to weigh a lot more than they should. I don't know how I'd react if Tess were injured. The only reason I felt it wasn't necessary to visit everyone else right away was because I assumed everyone would be safe.

'I said I feel Mama!' Sylvie thumped my forehead with her paw.

"I know!" I waved her paw away before turning my focus back to the giant double door entrance that drew nearer.

"Ouch." The skin under my dimension ring suddenly burned as if something inside it wanted to come out.

Ignoring it, as I had more pressing matters, I placed both my palms on the surface of the door and pushed it open.

"FWOOOOOM"

As soon as the door swung open, an unfamiliar sinister aura visibly surged forward in an attempt to entrap me. This dark fog felt like thousands of thorny vines as it coiled around my arms and legs.

"WHO'S TH... ARTHUR?" Amidst the noticeably dark wave emanating from a particular focal point, I heard Grandpa Virion's husky voice boom.

"Yeah, it's me, Gramps! What's going on?" I yelled past the sound of what reminded me of the crashing of an ocean's waves against a cliff

"God am I glad you're still alive, Brat. I think I'm becoming somewhat thankful for your cockroach-like tenacity, HAHA! Come over here, I need your help!" Still confused by what was happening, I chose to ignore Gramps' slightly insulting metaphor and walked carefully towards him. The aura was getting stronger, and I felt my skin start to bleed from small tears, which cut through my clothes.

Willing mana to shield both Sylvie and I, I made my way towards the source of the aura using Grandpa Virion's hazy figure as a guide; each step felt like I was pushing against a reinforced wall.

"What in the... Tess?!" As I got closer, I could faintly make out the figure, lying in front of Gramps, that was the source of this aura.

When I finally reached Grandpa Virion, I winced from the searing pain caused by my dimension ring that seemed to have gotten stronger. Gramps wasn't in good shape; his pale face was drenched in sweat as he tried his best to suppress the oppressive aura emanating from Tess, to little avail.

I took a closer look and what I saw made my eyes widen in surprise. Tendrils of vines completely enclosed the figure I assumed was Tessia. The thick dark aura made it hard for me to make out what it was until now.

"How much time has passed on the outside, brat? I think I've been holding in this foul aura for the past day or so after she came back from the dungeon." He gave me a weary chuckle.

"What's happening to her, Gramps?" I didn't remember anything like this happening back when I was assimilating with Sylvia's dragon will.

"Honestly, I'm not sure. Typically, the purpose of assimilation is to enable the host's body to gradually withstand and control the beast will's power, but in this case, it seems to be the opposite. I'm beginning to worry that this beast's will is trying to take over Tess' body." Grandpa Virion's shaking voice was filled with unease...

"How is that possible? I've never heard of something like that happening." My brows furrowed as I contemplated a possible cause. My thoughts kept going back to the mana beasts that had been corrupted by the black-horned demons.

"I'm not so sure, brat. I feel like that Elderwood you fought might've been mutated." Virion's hoarse voice indicated that he was most likely at his breaking point.

I was ready to take over Gramps, ignoring the burning sensation from my ring that was evidently growing more painful.

It happened even before my hands touched the surface of the cocoon Tess was in.

I could instantly recognize the sound of flesh tearing as I instinctively shift my body in hopes to dodge in time.

"KYU!!!" 'PAPA!' "OII, ARTHUR!"

Both Sylvie and Virion's voice sounded muffled through the pounding of my eardrums.

Chapter 74

Order of Power

A stain of blood began spreading from underneath the remains of my shirt as I barely managed to dodge the spear of twisted vines aimed straight for my heart.

My heart pounded with a force strong enough to break out of my ribcage from the thought of death looming before me. I almost died. This sensation felt different from the other near death experiences I had had. It was almost instantaneous; I could've died in that split second; and it would've been because of Tess, no less.

I knew women were dangerous.

Barely dodging the tendril, I grimaced at the feeling of blood trickling down my cheek.

I almost chuckled at the comical situation stirring in my mind. Grandpa Virion's hands were literally on the cocoon, but as soon as I got near her, a flurry of spear-like vines automatically locked onto me for the kill? I knew that, deep down, Tessia was still mad at me.

I parried the next dark, spear-like tendril before things became even worse. The cocoon that wrapped around Tess began expanding as an uncountable number of vines began surfacing from the ground beneath her.

"Kuu!" 'Papa, you're okay!' I heard Sylvie chirp near Gramps.

Grandpa Virion's shoulders loosened as he let out a sigh of relief. "I thought you almost died brat. What's happening now?"

"Yeah, that was... a little too close for comfort, and I honestly have no clue what's happening now, Gramps. Maybe your granddaughter doesn't like me so much anymore." I managed to shoot him a smirk, making him chuckle despite the situation we were in.

After another thick layer of vines intertwined around the existing ones that formed Tess' cocoon, dozens of tendrils began positioning themselves to, once again, shoot at

me. Just me.

“Kuu...” ‘What do we do?’

Sylvie, who was perched next to Grandpa, tilted her head in confusion, since the ‘enemy’ was her mama.

‘I want you to stay with Grandpa Virion. She’s only aiming at me for some reason.’

After dodging the discharge of tendrils, I positioned myself away from Gramps and Sylv. Gramps was drained of all of his mana from suppressing the dark aura for almost two days straight while Sylv was better off not being used until I knew exactly what the implications would be.

What’s more, ‘Tess’ was becoming more creative in her attacks; her next wave of tendrils was even laced with sharp thorns. The more I avoided the spears of vines, the surer I was that the beast will was dead set on trying to kill only me. It also wasn’t helping that my ring was burning to an almost unbearable degree.

Could it be that the Elderwood Guardian’s dying will was hoping to gain redemption from me since I was the one that defeated him down in the dungeon? If that really happened to be the case, I hope I live long enough to find out.

Frustrated, I withdrew my sword from my dimension ring, but as I did, something else came out with it.

While Dawn’s Ballad appeared promptly in my hand, a small shining orb shot out of the ring towards the cocoon.

It was the orb that that homeless storekeeper had given me!

The clear orb, about the size of a marble, sparkled with an array of colors as it bolted towards the enlarging cocoon.

What the hell?

Grandpa Virion noticed it too but he only gazed at me in confusion; probably thinking that I had done it intentionally.

Streaks of light escaped from the crevices in between the vines as the orb sunk into

the cocoon.

*BOOOOM! *

Before we even had the chance to wonder what was going on, an explosion occurred from within the cocoon, revealing a menacing, black haired Tessia.

As the orb sunk into her stomach where her mana core was, Tess' sickly complexion went back to normal... no, beyond normal. Her now flawless pearl skin seemed to literally radiate as her black hair turned back into her original gunmetal silver hue.

Tessia was still unconscious, but the vines held her up and unfortun- conveniently covering her private areas at the same time...

Her physical appearance wasn't the only thing that changed. As the orb disappeared completely inside her abdomen, Tessia's body was completely covered in an aura I had never seen before; distinctly different from the usual mana existent in the atmosphere, in an almost mystical way.

Surrounding her was a scorching flame comprised of brilliant emerald gems. Millions of green, leaf-shaped embers made up this unique aura. As the emerald aura expanded, the once black vines turned a serene jade green. Even as the mesmerizing aura drew nearer, for some reason, I didn't fear it. Before it reached any of us, the aura shrunk back and dissipated.

As Tessia's figure fell, I jumped up and took out the coat I used while I was an Adventurer, swiftly wrapping it around her bare body as I held her in my arms.

The dark aura that filled the training room was completely gone, and more importantly, Tessia was safe.

"Mmm... not now, Arthur. Too soon." Tessia mumbled as her face revealed a coquettish smile.

...She was most definitely safe.

"Pfft! Hahahaha!" Relief washing over me, I laughed. I laughed full-heartedly at Tess' sleep talk and just the fact that she was okay.

"TESSIA!" Grandpa Virion came running with Sylvie dangling from his long white hair.

“She’s okay, Gramps. She’s just sleeping now.” I set her down and fell onto my butt as all the strength I had left, left me.

Both Sylv and Gramps began meticulously inspecting the slumbering Tessia before they heaved a sigh of relief as well.

“...She is okay.” Gramps slumped down next to me while Sylvie curled up next to Tess. For a brief moment, we just blankly stared at the other end of the training grounds, too tired to even think.

“..”

“So did you get a good eyeful?” Turning my head, I could see Grandpa Virion’s smirk grow so wide that I was rather surprised his lips didn’t tear.

“SHE’S THIRTEEN!” I groaned as I fell back on the soft grass-like moss.

“Almost fourteen.” He corrected as he shifted his softening gaze back towards Tessia.

“I’m glad you’re okay, brat. This girl would’ve been devastated if she found out you hadn’t made it...”

“...And thank you... for saving my granddaughter back at the dungeon, and now.” Virion’s voice grew softer, almost mumbling, as he said this.

“What makes you think I saved your daughter, Gramps?” I replied without getting up, using my hands to support my head up.

“Call it a Grandfather’s intuition. With your abilities, I know that if you only thought of yourself, you wouldn’t have ended up in dangerous situations like these; so again, thank you.” The sincerity in his voice was confirmed as his eyes met mine.

“Ugh, forget it. Don’t get so serious like that suddenly, you’re scaring me.” I rolled to my side, my back facing Grandpa Virion.

“So when did you get back? Your family knows you’re alive, right?” Gramps replied.

“Of course. I got home last night and had even spent some time with my family earlier today...”

“Gramps, I’m sorry. I-I should’ve rushed back. I just assumed that she’d be fine once she woke up since she crossed the last leg of assimilating with her beast will back at the dungeon. If I had known things could go wrong like this, I would’ve rushed here as soon as I got back.” I looked at Virion, almost pleadingly.

Back when I was assimilating with Sylvia’s beast will, I remember Virion explaining to me how there was one final wave of struggle from the beast will before the assimilation was completely over; how that was normal...

I should’ve prepared for the worst... I almost lost her today.

This thought scared me a lot more than I would’ve ever believed possible in my past life.

“Your parents probably had their fair shares of worries raising you, huh?” Unexpectedly, Grandpa Virion let out a soft chortle.

“Wha... yeah, I guess,” I responded, thrown off by his sudden question.

“You did good in going to your family first. Tessia has her family to take care of her... she’s not alone, you know. You probably thought of this when you decided to spend the day with them. Your family probably needed you to be there for them as well, since you gave them quite a scare. Don’t forget that and don’t be sorry that you spent the much needed time with your family.” Grandpa Virion patted my back, consolingly.

I didn’t know what to say. I was thankful that he knew me well enough without needing an explanation, or an excuse...

Again, a tranquil silence hung over us until I finally got around to asking the question that had been clawing the back of my mind.

“Hey Gramps... how much do you know about the Six Lances?” I asked as my gaze focused on Sylvie, who ended up falling asleep curled up next to Tess.

“...The Six Lances? Why the sudden curiosity?” Virion asked after a while.

“...” I didn’t respond.

“What exactly do you want to know about them?” Accepting my silence, he responded tactfully.

“How strong are they?” After a bit of thought, I started off with a simple question.

He let out a slow, elongated breath. “Brat, let me start by asking you this: how strong do you imagine white core mages to be?”

My brows furrowed as I began calculating how many mages it would take to hold down a single White core mage. Since it took roughly around twenty Solid-Yellow core mages to hold off a single Silver core mage, would it take less Silver core mages than that to beat a white core mage... or was the power level increase exponential?

“I’m not really sure, Gramps,” I finally said, defeated.

“To make it easier for you, we’ll use myself as the figure of measurement. I don’t ever recall explicitly telling you this, but I’m a Mid-silver core mage. It would take roughly around ten of me to keep one Mid-white core mage at bay, and that’s being optimistic.” Grandpa Virion let out a chortle.

“Ten of you...” I muttered under my breath.

“Now, Cynthia is a High-silver. Even after being generous, it would take around six or seven of her to keep one Mid-white core at bay.” He shrugged as he spoke.

“ ... ”

I couldn’t imagine my current self being able to defeat that many Virions or Goodskys. Perhaps if I were to release the second phase of my Dragon’s Will, I might be barely able to contend with three Grampa Virions, however, the drawback would be tremendous.

“I don’t get it... where did these abnormally strong figures come from, and why haven’t they decided to just take control of a Kingdom? I mean, with their strength, it’s not like any King or Queen can give them much of a fight. What’s been keeping the royal family in power when there are white core mages capable of slaughtering them and their armies rather easily?” I asked, trying to make sense of this world’s government system.

“You have an excellent point. You’re right, by strength alone, the six lances, or any white core mage for that matter, could probably wipe out a kingdom on their own.” He glanced over at Tessia to make sure she was still sleeping.

“Before I say anything more, this will need to be an absolute secret from Tessia. I want her to stay ignorant of these rather... dark matters... at least until she’s older.” Grandpa Virion had a tender smile on his face as he looked at his granddaughter.

“Mm. I’ll keep it a secret.” I nodded.

“I’ll explain where they came from after, but the strength of each one of the Six Lances... They are now above that of regular White core mages, but before being knighted, most of them were actually only Silver core mages.” Gramps spoke with a faraway, peaceful expression.

“Huh? That makes no sense...” I was about to rebut.

“Brat, do you think the royal family, without any major powerhouses in line for the throne, could stay in power since the beginning of the three kingdoms?” His peaceful expression disappeared as he peered at me with a face clearly depicting his mixed feelings.

He continued, “This is classified information shared only to the royal families of each respective race, but I’m telling you because, somehow, I know you’ll need this information in the future; and I know you’d be able to handle it...”

He let out a heavy sigh that seemed to contain a bit of his very soul.

“Do you believe in deities?”

Chapter 75

Manifest Destinies

The world of my past, the world where I came from, still often came to mind. It was a life of isolation for me but it wasn't as if I loathed every moment of my near-forty years there. I especially enjoyed visiting the orphanages and playing with the children. Of course, most of the boys considered sword fighting and ki training as their form of play, so whenever I went, I ended up spending hours teaching them.

I remember one day rather explicitly, when a boy in the orphanage – ah right, Jacob was his name – asked me question.

'Brother Grey, do you believe in God?' he asked, looking up while tugging on my sleeve.

I never believed in God, or whatever higher being some of the people believed in. How can there be a God in a world where your level of martial strength determined how you could live your life. Parents who birthed physically weak or crippled babies were considered humiliations, often ridiculed by others behind their backs. Those babies, even if they did grow up to live past adolescence, would never be able to amount to anything. They would have about as much recognition as a fly buzzing in someone's face: annoying, better off dead, useless.

Even a woman, no matter how beautiful and charismatic she was, would only amount to a high-class prostitute if she didn't have at least the minimal strength needed to be considered 'mediocre' amongst practitioners. Even those old bastards in the Council, that sat on their ass all day and used everyone like pawns, were once grand fighters and famous figures.

How could a God exist in a world like that? Even if a God or Deity existed in my previous world, he certainly wasn't very merciful or loving, let alone fair.

When that child, Jacob, asked me if I believed in God, I couldn't answer. These children believed, like I once did, that there was a higher power watching over them... protecting them.

Again, in this world, I was asked a similar question, but by someone much older than me.

Did I believe in deities... some sort of higher powers that were above us and unreachable?

“...”

“I’m not sure. Do deities exist?” The words ‘...in this world?’ almost slipped from my mouth.

“Haha! I’ve been asking that question all my life, but I’ve started to think that deities might still exist,” Grandpa Virion let out a hearty laugh.

“What made you change your mind?” I tilted my head in curiosity.

“Her.” I thought Virion pointed his finger at Tess, but I realized it was the sleeping Sylvie he was directing his gaze at.

“Wait, Sylvie? You think Sylvie is a deity?” Almost choking on my spit, I directed my gaze back at Gramps.

“Brat, deities are different from what religious books say about Gods. Deities are beings that are able to ascend from what we consider their mortal bodies and fully harmonize with mana. Dragons, at least what I’ve read about them, are beings that can naturally become deities. They can’t be classified as just S class, or SS class mana beasts; if you compare to mana cores, deities would be the level one would reach after breaking out of White core stage.” Grandpa Virion looked down at his own two hands as he said this, letting out a scoff.

“Here we are, Elves, Humans, and Dwarves alike, at most, barely able to tap into the power of a white stage mana core. Yet, there may be beings still existing that can easily level mountains and flood valleys... Haaa~” Again, Grandpa Virion had that faraway look.

He closes his eyes for a while before slowly opening them again, his gaze shifting towards me.

“You’ve read about the war between the three races, as well as the most recent war between the Humans and Elves, but compared to those two wars, this continent was much more chaotic and dangerous in ancient times. The three races were nomadic back then, always on the run from mana beasts. The Humans, Elves and Dwarves all travelled separately due to clashes in appearance and culture, but whenever any of the

aces met, we were on fairly good terms... we had to be; we exchanged information and traded raw resources that we picked up along the way. This is now known as the Beast Era, where the mana beasts were rampant and ruled the continent.”

“I don’t understand. Why didn’t we use magic to drive the mana beasts away? I could understand maybe avoiding A-class mana beasts and up, but I don’t see why we were so helpless.” My brows furrowed in confusion.

“It’s not that we didn’t, it’s that we couldn’t. Brat, have you ever noticed the painting in the main hall of the Royal Palace in Elenoir?” He suddenly switched topics.

“You mean that enormous painting in the living room? I mean, I noticed it at first but I couldn’t really make sense of it so I just disregarded it.” I let out an awkward laugh, scratching my head.

“Every one of the three Royal Palaces has a painting similar to that one; it is a depiction of a powerful deity gifting us with the tool to overcome the mana beasts and put an end to the Beast Era.” I couldn’t tell how Virion was feeling as he said all this, his expression still a mixture of various emotions.

No matter how ridiculous this sounded to me, Gramps’ tone showed me he wasn’t joking as he said this, so I stayed quiet and let him continue.

“This deity appeared in front of three people, and they were the forefathers of what are now the three royal families. He bestowed our ancestors with six artifacts, which were distributed equally amongst the three ancestors that were chosen by the deity to become kings. For the humans, the head of the Glayder family at that time received two; the dwarves, the head of the Greysunders family received two, and lastly, for the elves, the ancestor of my Eralith family also received two.” Virion couldn’t help but smirk after looking at my expression.

“Huh? Why would this so-called ‘deity’ just give the three races these treasures?” I sputtered incredulously, not able to hold it in.

“Let me get to that, Brat,” he reprimanded.

“Remember, this was ages before I was born. This knowledge is passed down from King to King and my guess is that information may have been exaggerated or skewed in certain directions along the way, but this is what I’ve been taught. The three King’s weren’t meant to use the three pairs of artifacts bestowed by the deity themselves, but

were instead meant to be bestowed onto their two most powerful subjects under a soul oath through a sort of knighting ceremony. With these powerful artifacts given to their strongest warriors, the three races were meant to use the power of the artifacts to protect themselves as well as to gain the upper hand in dominating the mana beasts as well as other ancient monsters of the time,” He explained.

“I would assume that giving three races super powerful artifacts just begs for chaos and war, rather than protection. I’m not so sure about the elves, but if you at least look at some of the humans, greed isn’t exactly a rare thing,” I chortled, shaking my head.

“Well, funny you say that because that’s what happened. The artifacts did indeed allow the elves, humans and dwarves to work together during that period to further expand their area of dominance. A lot of the mana beasts were either killed or driven off to what is now known as the Beast Glades, putting an end to the Beast Era. However, shortly after, greed did get a hold of the three kings and their subjects. Besides the incredible power the artifacts gave to its wielders, it gave them insights on how to utilize the source of energy that makes up the world, which we now call mana. With this, the users of the artifacts taught it to those who they deemed capable, thus, giving rise to the very first batch of mages. Drunk on power, the concept of harmony dwindled and soon led to internal strife due to greed,” Virion looked at me with a painful smile before continuing.

“The three pairs of artifacts bestowed had different attributes and were divided between the Humans, Elves and Dwarves respectively, segregating all of us even further. The distinct features in specialization between the three races we have today are supposedly due to the artifacts. What had transpired then was: The Dwarves, who reasoned that because they are the beings closest to the earth, believed that they should naturally be the rulers of the continent. We Elves, reasoned that because we were the closest to all living things, we should be the rulers of the continent, while Humans, who were able to train in and utilize all of the four major elements, believed that the deity naturally wanted to make them the rulers of the continent.” Virion looked back at Tess to make sure she was still asleep.

“The first war, which lasted longer than the time they drove the mana beasts into the Beast Glades, was what led to the segregation of the three races as well as the formation of the three kingdoms. The second war, which you’re more familiar with, happened between the humans and the elves. So... going back to the question of where the Six Lances came from, can you take a guess?” He tested.

“Wait... so those six artifacts that were bestowed upon your ancestors by the so-called deity were given to the Six Lances?” – my mind raced as pieces of the puzzle began to fit – “And the artifacts are the reason why they were able to rise past the Silver core stage and become White core mages, and also being the reason they aren’t able to go against the Council since they are soul-bound, just like the previous users who were tied to the first kings,” I exclaimed after coming to a revelation as everything began to click.

“The Lances were most likely chosen amongst candidates that were brought up closely by the royal family of their respective race, and after they were deemed worthy, they were bestowed the artifact along with the soul oath that bound their lives to the kings,” I continued.

“Exactly. They were secretly raised as candidates to each wield an artifact. However, it wasn’t until the discovery of another continent that the three races decided that they needed to unify.” Grandpa Virion had a distant look on his face as he explained.

“One last question. So were the artifacts given to figures in the past as well? How come we’ve never heard of them?” I was sitting up by this point, thoroughly focused on the conversation and leaning forward as if it were possible to receive information faster this way.

“Yes, but this is the first time they were publicized. In the past, wielders of the artifacts were always protecting the king and his family from the shadows. It is only now, after the unification of the continent that we decided to publicize the wielders. Of course, no one else knows that they got their strength through the power of the artifacts. If that secret were to be let out, it would most likely cause a coup d’état; the greed of numerous silver core mages desperate to surpass their limits is not to be looked down upon. Who knows what extent some might go to, maybe even destroying the entire royal bloodline in hopes to be the new masters of the artifacts,” Virion paused again before turning to stare at Sylvie again.

“I imagine your bond has the capability to become a deity. I’m not sure how long that would take and if we’d be even alive when that happens, but Arthur, you need to get stronger. Call it my own senile intuition but I feel like changes are going to happen soon... enormous changes. I just hope that I’m wrong.” This was the first time I’ve seen Grandpa Virion have such a worried look on his face.

My mind flashed to the message that Sylvia had left within me after teleporting me to

Elshire Forest; about how I would hear from her again when I reached the stage past White core. I'm beginning to think that maybe these so-called deities weren't as fictional as I believed them to be.

"Mmmm... what's going on? Why am I sleeping on the ground?"

Chapter 76

Good to See You

VIRION ERALITH'S POV:

What in the name just happened? What was that bizarre aura around Tessia? What did the boy do anyway?

I was just barely able to spot that orb shoot out and get sucked into my granddaughter's body. It seemed sort of like an elixir, but I wasn't really able to tell...

Anyway, I'm just glad that she's safe now.

I almost feel bad for the boy, he had just crawled back up to the surface after falling into an underground dungeon- god knows how deep- and now he had to deal with all this.

Was I doing the right thing revealing all this information to Arthur?

There was a bitter taste left on my tongue after I finished explaining everything to the boy; I forget sometimes that he's actually younger than Tess.

It's odd though; I can't quite put my finger on it, but more and more, my instincts tell me that despite his monstrous ability in mana manipulation and latent potential as a mage, his cognitive acuteness, his mental capacity that doesn't belong to a prepubescent child, is what'll make this brat so scary in the future. It's just that, currently, his level of power has yet to catch up to the level of his intellect.

"Mmmm... what's going on? Why am I sleeping on the ground?"

My ears perked up immediately at the sound of my granddaughter's feeble voice.

"G-Grandpa? Where am... ART!!!!"

My arms were already stretched out wide, ready to embrace my one and only beloved granddaughter, but oddly enough, instead of coming into her grandfather's arms, her

body bolts away from me and towards the boy.

My granddaughter... you're going the wrong way.

"ARTHUR!!!! You're alive!!" Tess almost knocked the boy back down onto the ground from how fast she bolted into his arms.

Meanwhile, my arms stayed stretched out.

Maybe the passing breeze would accept my embrace...

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

As Tess' faint voice reached my ears and with her teary eyes locked onto mine, she bit her lower lip to keep herself from breaking down; I stood there at a loss. A wave of different emotions, half of which I didn't even know I could feel, washed over me.

"ARTHUR!! You're alive!" Her face was already buried in my chest as she finished her sentence.

"Yeah..." — I gently petted her hair — "I'm alive."

I turned to Virion, and I swear I could almost see his petrified body crumbling into bits with his lonely arms stretched out.

His head turned like a badly oiled robot, revealing his gaze, which was anything but automaton by the image he projected.

Traitor.

Grandpa should still come first.

You're dead to me, Brat.

These were the thoughts that might as well have been tattooed across his forehead by how blatantly his foul mood was leaking out.

Giving Grandpa Virion a sympathetic smile, I looked back down at Tess who was still

in my arms. Only when my old robe, that she had been wearing, slipped slightly off of her bare shoulder, did I remember that she was completely naked underneath.

“KYUU!”

Sylvie was bouncing up and down trying to get Tess’ attention as the latter clung onto me like glue, but to no avail.

‘Twas a shame Tessia wasn’t fully developed...’

“The last thing I remember was you handing me over to someone. I can only recall bits and pieces of what happened after because I was in too much pain then. B-but I heard broken pieces of conversations about how you didn’t make it out,” she said as her arms were still clinging onto me like an infant koala. The way she looked up at me with those tear-filled eyes made me almost lose myself.

“I’ll fill you in on what happened, but for now”—I peeled her off of me, wrapping her tighter with the only piece of clothing covering her— “let’s get you decent, Princess.”

“What are you talking...” was all she managed to say before looking down, her eyes widening in horror.

“KYYAAAAAAAAAA!! NOOOOOOOOO!”

*BOOOOOOOOOOM! *

Without even the chance to react, Grandpa Virion, Sylvie, and I were knocked back by a surge of mana that seemed to have come out of nowhere.

I managed to recover in time, landing on my feet. As I looked to my side, I saw that Virion and Sylvie were both uninjured. Surprised, but uninjured.

Not even caring about the throbbing pain in my chest, I stared, slack-jawed at the sight before us.

Tess was at the epicenter of a storm of translucent emerald green vines, dozens of meters in length, all snapping and whipping around chaotically. What was even more strange was that it looked more like an extension of the bright green aura surrounding Tess, who was now curled up in the fetal position.

“T-this... mana formation of this magnitude... shouldn’t be possible for her!” Grandpa Virion’s stood there, gaping.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I mumbled to myself.

Cupping my hands, I yelled out, “TESS! YOU NEED TO CALM DOWN!”

“SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP! GO AWAY! I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU DIDN’T TELL ME I WAS NAKED!” she screamed, her eyes still shut tightly in embarrassment. Something told me that those semitransparent tendrils responded to her emotions because they were swaying even more fiercely right now.

“Didn’t you learn that telling a screaming girl to calm down never actually calms her down?” Grandpa Virion said, shaking his head in mock disappointment.

Of course... I’m the ignorant one I guess.

What good was having been a king? Psh... only the strongest in my country? What good does all of that do, Arthur, if you can’t even quell the anger of a 13-year-old girl.

“TESS! It’s your grandfather! Open your eyes!” Virion shouted out this time.

“Huh?”

As Tess peeked from one eye, she finally realized what was happening.

“What’s going on? What is all of this?” The flustered Tess looked to us for help.

“Try controlling your emotions, it’s making your mana flow go out of control,” I tried to explain in a more reasonable tone.

Tess looked to Virion, who was nodding in agreement with me.

As realization dawned on her, Tess closed her eyes and began meditating, the translucent emerald vines slowly dissipated, fading out of sight.

The three of us rushed to where Tess was curled up as soon as the vines, that seemed to be made up of pure mana, disappeared.

“Quick, Gramps, check her mana core.”

I was going off on a hunch, but I was kind of scared to hear the truth.

“That’s just what I was about to do, brat.” Virion rolled up his sleeves and imbued some mana into his palms.

“Wait! Art, turn around!” Tess was obviously out of breath but she was aware that something was different with her body.

“Sigh... I already saw everyth—”

“NOW!”

“—yes ma’am.”

“Psh... former king? More like whipped dog,” I mumbled to myself as I turned my back to them.

“I-It can’t be... Ha ha ha... W-what in the world?” I heard Virion’s trembling voice.

“What? What is it? What stage is her core at, Gramps? Dark Yellow? Don’t tell me... she’s at Solid Yellow like me?” I was itching to turn around.

“Half step from Initial Silver. She almost broke through into the Initial Silver stage.”

“WHAT?!” I whipped my head back, causing Tess to wrap the robe covering her even more tightly.

Ignoring Tess’s glare and protests, I put my hand on her abdomen... over the robe.

He was right... Even when sensing directly, I couldn’t recognize the extent of her mana core, which meant she was at a higher level than I was.

Both Gramps and I fell straight to our bums in utter disbelief.

She broke through out of Light Orange and into the Dark Yellow stage not too long ago. That means she skipped through all of Yellow and straight into Initial Silver?

This gravity defying news was hard for me to swallow. I took my body’s composition for granted; because I’m a quadra-elemental mage, it was a lot easier for me to break through, it became distinctively harder to get past bottlenecks once I reached the Dark

Yellow stage. Not to mention the fact that I broke through at 3 - much earlier than everyone else.

The “gifted” students in this academy have ten years to pass the final exam in order to graduate. There is no set stage that a student’s core has to reach in this time but on average, alumni tended to be around Light Orange stage by the time they graduate. After reaching that stage, they would be given a seat among the upper echelons of practically anywhere they go.

For even the most talented dual-elemental mages, it should take exponentially longer for them to make breakthroughs if at all, but Tess had just been able to break that common sense and skip straight into the threshold just before breaking into the Initial Silver stage. That’s potentially a couple decades of cultivation condensed into merely a fortnight...

The absurdity of it all...

“What the hell did you give her, brat?” Virion asked. “I’ve never heard of a Beast Will tempering a mana core. Or did it perhaps have anything to do with that orb you threw at her?”

“What do you mean half step away? What orb?” Tess’ echoed, puzzled by our conversation.

“I-I thought it was just some kind of elixir...” I was at a loss for words.

What the hell was that vanishing elixir shop?

“Arthur, if there ever was such an elixir that could do what that orb did just now, wars would break loose in hopes to win it,” Grandpa Virion shook his head, still in shock, as he imagined everything he just told me, “How did you get your hands on whatever orb that was anyway?”

Oh you know, I got it from a homeless looking fellow that owned a disappearing Elixir shop...

“Ha ha ha haha... I got it for a silver coin, Gramps.”

Virion gawked at me incredulously. By his expression, I bet he would’ve been less surprised if I told him I stole it from a god.

"I don't exactly know myself, I kind of got this orb from a peddler but that's as much as I know..." I let out another small laugh in helplessness.

"Can you tell me what's going on? You guys weren't actually being serious right?" Tess immediately began focusing on her mana core. "No way... m-my mana core is light yellow now... and it already has so many cracks on it," she said as her voice trembled.

"H-honey... you're actually a peak light yellow core mage now," Grandpa Virion mumbled, almost whispering.

Thud

Tess' eyes rolled back as she fainted, her body slumped against Sylvie's back as my bond moved just in time to catch her.

"This girl just can't stay awake..." I grumbled as I positioned her more comfortably on the grass floor.

"She's sure to be exhausted after having gone through all of this; her body was under constant stress, and breaking through more than 3 stages at once took a toll on her mind as well. I guess the realization was the tipping point, haha," Virion let out a chuckle as he picked her up.

"I'm going to take her back to Elenoir through the gate. She needs some rest, and I'm sure my son and daughter-in-law are still worried. Kukuku, I'm kind of looking forward to how they'll react to this. Sigh~ Imagine... Tess, a Silver core mage at the age of 13," he boasted with a wide grin on his face. "Do you want to come with me?"

"I'll pass on that. I know Tess is safe, and she knows I'm safe as well; that'll have to do for now. We'll catch up when she returns to school," I replied.

"Mm. I have a meeting with The Council that I've been avoiding 'till now, so I won't get to see you for a while. Get some rest, boy." Grandpa Virion throws me wink and walks out of the training room with Tess in tow.

She was at a higher level than me now...

My mind kept going back to the homeless man and his elixir shop. Was the orb he gave me really the reason she was able to break through like that? There wasn't any other explanation otherwise.

“Kyu~” ‘Papa, I’m hungry!’ Sylvie hopped back onto the top of my head and kept thumping my forehead in complaint.

“Haha, me too, Sylv. But before we go back, let’s visit your Uncle Elijah,” I replied, rubbing my bond’s ears.

“Kuu...” ‘...But, food.’



“ARTHURR!!” Elijah roared as he nearly head-butted me.

I had an eerie sense of déjà vu, but this scene wasn’t nearly as heartwarming.

“Haa~... there there. Yes, I’m still alive. You can’t get rid of me that easily,” I said in consolation, patting my best friend’s head.

Sniff “I know... You’re like a cockroach.” *Sniff*

This brat...

I peeled him off of me; again, very similarly to what happened just thirty minutes ago, but the person in front of me had a string of mucus hanging off of his right nostril, the other end of the slippery secretion attached itself to my shirt.

A friend... my best friend. Elijah was an entity I had now in this life that I so wanted in my previous one. A person I could let loose and be a child again with, no matter how old or grand I was before.

“Haha! It’s good to see your disgusting face again, pal,” I grinned at him, patting him on the shoulder.

Chapter 77

Allies?

CYNTHIA GOODSKY'S POV:

Standing before the heavy iron doors, I took a deep breath. Beyond this entrance were the six former kings and queens of this continent. It wasn't their titles that were making me apprehensive, but more so the fact that they were ultimately the ones who would shape or destroy the future of this continent.

Even with an augmented hearing spell, I was unable to clearly hear what was being discussed on the other side, leaving me to wonder what their course of action might be.

What was I to tell them?

What was I able to tell them? I truly had to be meticulous in the words and actions I use.

I've only gotten a glimpse of the consequences that I would face if I didn't abide and I knew I had no way around it.

It just wasn't worth it... not at this point.

Was there no other way around this? Was I to just sit and watch this peaceful continent that I've grown to love crumble without being able to do anything?

It couldn't be helped; I've deviated too far from what I was originally supposed to do.

My hopes in establishing myself and the foundations of Xyrus Academy up to what it was today was for the sake of this continent. That we might have some hope...

It's been too long since the time of war, though. Students wanted to get strong; not to protect and fight for what was right but for their own conceited pride. It's been a long-going struggle to not only shape up the level of magic in this continent, but also instilling proper values.

The only thing I could do for this country now was to prepare the next generation as well as get rid of anything that might hinder their plans. I've been personally getting rid of more and more spies that were being sent out from my homeland.

They were getting impatient. I could tell by some of the toxic traces affecting the dungeons that they were beginning their next phase.

It was beginning to become rather difficult for me to keep up my current pace, though. I could tell Arthur was becoming rather suspicious at times. I had been careless in exposing the wound I received from one of the affected mana beasts.

I'm just not sure anymore...

Was I doing the right thing? Would what I'm doing even give us a chance?

I once thought so, but I'm not so optimistic anymore.

Sigh...

The two mages standing guard on either sides of the door were carefully observing me, probably wondering why I wasn't going in. I noticed one was at the Initial Silver core stage while the other, slightly thinner mage, was at the Mid Silver core stage; they would be considered peaks in this continent, but only in this continent.

I signaled to the guards that I was ready to go inside, letting them inform The Council.

"You may enter," the knights announced, opening the doors fully.

"—AND I SAID THAT WE CAN'T JUST BE LYING HERE ON OUR ASSES WAITING FOR MORE DEATHS! ALDUIN, MERIAL, WHY AREN'T YOU SAYING ANYTHING! ONE OF YOUR LANCES IS DEAD!" I saw Dawsid Greysunders, former king of the dwarves standing up with his finger pointed at Alduin Eralith, former king of the elves, who was seated with his arms crossed and eyes closed.

"Calm yourself Dawsid, before we rashly try and hunt for whoever or whatever killed Alea, we need more information. This might be somehow linked to communication failures with the Dicateous. What if, like we suspected, the unknown continent is involved and we end up... Ah, Director Goodsky. We received your sound transmission; please, have a seat." Blaine Glayder, the former king of the humans stretched his arm to direct me to a nearby empty seat.

“Yes, but it seems that my message was unnecessary,” I respond while taking a small bow before sitting down. King Greysunders also reluctantly took a seat in the chair that seemed a bit too big for him.

“Yes, Alduin was alerted almost immediately after Alea passed; unfortunately, we have no way of knowing how she was killed. Do you happen to know anything, Director Cynthia?” Merial Eralith, former queen of the elves, as well as the mother of my only disciple, asked me.

I should’ve realized that they might’ve already known thanks to those bestowed artifacts I was informed about.

“I apologize. Truth be told, I was not the one that found her body.” Taking out the adamantium tag that belonged to Alea, I handed it over to Lady Eralith.

“Who was it that found her body? We need to bring that person here.” Glaundera Greysunders, former queen of the dwarves, slammed her palms on the table we were situated around.

“That... may be a bit troublesome,” I said, hesitatingly. “You see, the person that found her body was one of my students, and that was only by accident.”

“No matter! Just bring that student here. We need as much detail about this disaster as possible before we can start slowly unfolding it to the public,” Lady Greysunders continued.

“I ensure you, that, the student does not know any more than what we might be able to guess. This student simply stumbled into the scene after the battle was long over,” I replied while shaking my head.

“Still, are you sure he wasn’t hiding anything from you?” King Eralith spoke up solemnly.

“This student is but a child that recently enrolled. He has no reason to hide any details from me. I fear he will only be more intimidated if we brought him here, causing him to make up details to gain The Council’s favor,” I lied.

I didn’t want to involve Arthur in all of this. Not yet. He wasn’t ready.

“Cynthia offers a valid point. There’s no use in interrogating a student that might make

up facts to feel like a hero. Besides, she already questioned the student,” Priscilla Glayder, former queen of the humans, defended.

“Yes, I was even able to find the scene of Ale... Code Aureate’s death,” I hurriedly replied. Maybe they will be able to find something. Indirectly helping them like this might prove to be fruitful.

The plan that I was informed of before I had come here seemed to have hastened for some reason, but I knew for a fact that it would still take years before the first course were to come to fruition. Until then, I had to somehow indirectly help them prepare for whatever was coming. Hopefully, I had enough time.

“All right. Then the next course of action is settled”—King Glayder motioned for a secretary to come— “dispatch our best tracking mages. We’ll have them find any sort of evidence that the perpetrator might’ve left. In the meantime, what is the current status on the remaining Lances?”

“Yes your Highness, our best trackers are already assembled and ready. As for the Lances, Codes Zero, Ohmwrecker, and Balrog were the first to arrive. We’ve received word that Code Thunderlord and Code Phantasm entered the premise not too long ago,” the secretary hurriedly announced while his head stayed bowed.

“Good. We’ll update them soon. Until then, make sure not a single word gets out that one of the Lances was killed,” King Glayder finished his statement while looking at me.

“Rest assured, the student is not the type to let this information out so easily. I will be sure to make it of utmost importance that he keeps the information he has a secret.” I answered back at the Council who were all waiting for me to respond.

After I was escorted out, Lady Eralith followed along and pulled me aside, away from everyone’s view. “Director Cynthia. How’s my Tessia? I’ve yet to hear back from Father-in-law,” her voice quaked with concern.

I shook my head. “I was not updated with the situation either. However, Tessia has both Arthur and Virion looking after her. She should be okay, Merial.”

“Mm, I hope so. I’ve barely been able to focus on everything going on because of Tessia’s condition. Let me know as soon as you’re updated. This way, at least Alduin and I will have the peace of mind to focus on this mess,” she says while handing me a sound transmission scroll.

Sound transmission devices were exceedingly costly so most did not have access to one, but the Council always had these in stock to send and receive information quickly.

"I'll be sure to tell you as soon as I find out." I give her a reassuring smile before letting her go back to the meeting hall.



Five silhouettes could be seen waiting in the dimly lit chamber on the bottom-most floor. Although the shadows covered the fives' faces, their voices could be clearly heard.

"Heh... So Alea died already?" a well-built man leaning against the back wall with his arms crossed scoffed.

"Bairon... watch your tone," an authoritative, icy voice rang from a proportioned slender figure sitting with one leg over the other.

"It can't be helped that I'm irritated; her dying so pathetically is trampling on the Lances' name," the man replied.

"Umu... Poor Alea. Mica feels bad for her," a sweet voice chimed from a figure whose body resembles that of a child.

"Aww~ I'll miss sharing cream puffs with Alea..." sighed a woman, whose seductive figure could not be hidden by the shadows.

"Bah! If she died, that just means that was her fate. It was her fate by the deities since she wasn't beautiful," a muscular figure shook his head in disappointment while stretching.

"Old man Olfred, Mica really doesn't get your sense of beauty, Hmph!" the child-like figure pouted back.

"Well I can tell you with certainty that you are indeed the ugliest."

"Urk! OLFRED YOU MEANIE!"

"Now now, don't pick on our cute Mica~. How can you say that she's ugly when she has a face cute enough to eat?"

“ERRMPH! Aya, your lumps of –Mmmmph–fat are choking Mica!”

“Stop acting like hyperactive children! As the strongest in this country, this shouldn’t phase us!”

“Oh my~ Bairon’s cranky again today. Even though you’re just a Bairon~”

“Tch... says the cow that has no sense of time, getting here the latest.”

“Enough. What did the Council say our next course of action was?”

“Bah! Those ugly old farts are still discussing what’s going to happen in there. They can’t compare to my dear King, Dawson Greysunders! Now he is a true beauty.”

“Eww... Mica likes strong pretty boys. King Greysunders is more like an old uncle to Mica.”

“Why you ugly midget of a... How dare you insult our most noble king! He is the one that blessed us with our powers! King Greysunders, like myself, does not age! We merely ripen like a fine wine. The Goddess of Beauty has blessed us after all.”

He thinks he’s so tough and special when Mica knows he’s not even the strongest.”

“What the hell did you say? Do you think that I, Bairon Wykes, next head of the Wykes Family, and a Lance personally chosen by King Glayder will stand for—”

“Everyone~ let’s all get along. Let’s not make this older sister get mad, hehe.”

““ ...””

“Sorry...”

“Tch...”

Chapter 78

Meanwhile (1)

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

“Hey, Art. I thought we were heading back to your home; where’re we going?” Elijah looked at me after noticing we took a different turn on the way back to Helstea Manor.

“There’s a place I need to stop by first. Don’t worry, it’ll be a quick detour,” I answered as I sped up with Sylvie on my head.

“Ah! Wait up!”

When we reached the destination, I couldn’t help but let out a disappointed breath, my shoulders dropping.

“I thought so...” I mumbled to myself.

“Xyrus Elixirs? Did you need to buy something from here? It’s almost midnight; of course it’s closed.” Elijah cupped his eyes over the front glass door, hoping to spot someone inside.

“It’s nothing. Let’s head back home,” I let out a sigh. As I was about to turn away from the building, a shiny object caught in the crevice of the aged alley leading to “Xyrus Elixirs” caught my attention.

As I kneeled down to retrieve it, my eyes narrowed. It was an orb similar to the one used on Tess, except, instead of rainbow speckles inside, there were golden flakes floating within. Attached to the small marble-sized orb was a crudely written note saying:

“Your little Princess will probably need this”

“What are you staring so intently at?” Elijah leaned over my shoulder to see.

I crumpled up the piece of parchment and put the orb inside my dimension ring.

“Let’s head back home first, Elijah. I’ll need to tell my family that I might have to miss a couple more days of school after. Go back to school tomorrow and tell everyone that I’m okay and safe,” I patted my best friend’s shoulder and gave him a reassuring smile in response to his concerned expression.

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell you about everything after I’m back.” With that, Elijah gave me an accepting nod back.



The day after~

KATHYLN GLAYDER’S POV:

After finding out what happened down at the dungeon from my brother, I was shocked. I almost wanted to blame him, to blame Professor Glory, to blame someone but I know it wasn’t anyone’s fault. Why do I always feel this way when it came to Arthur?

Besides, he already had the Student Council President. Well, I’m not sure of that, but I just have a feeling that there was something going on.

I shook my head. Why was I placing more importance on his love life than his actual life?

Arthur is going to be okay, right? He’s just that type of person. No matter what situation arises, he always manages to come back with a nonchalant smile on his face that always calms me.

I’m confident that he’ll be okay!

I’m sure of it...

“Ugh...”

Surprised that I let out an audible groan, I quickly covered my mouth, hoping that no one heard something so disgraceful. After checking that I was alone, I exhaled a sharp breath of relief.

It had been rather stressful these days being a disciplinary committee officer. I

assumed things would stay quiet after the formation of the Disciplinary Committee - almost to the point of wondering if we were even needed - but recently some unforeseen circumstances have been brought to our attention.

Claire Bladeheart, our leader, pulled each of us aside a few of days ago. While explaining the cause, she implied that Arthur was an undeniable factor that led to this.

I wanted to rebut then, but I decided to hear her out. Claire had been secretly gathering information with Kai, who specializes in stealth. It seems that there was a radical group that was dissatisfied with the direction the Academy was heading towards recently.

This group was made up of only humans, and from the few faces that Kai was able to catch a glimpse of, they were all from rather high up noble families.

One particular noble that was spotted was named Charles Ravenpor. His father was on rather close terms with mine, but strictly business. Father would always grumble in dissatisfaction after having a meeting with Mr. Ravenpor because of how ill-mannered and self-centered he was.

While I was jealous for Claire's unwavering confidence that Arthur was still alive, she was also relieved that Arthur wasn't here at the moment because he was actually one of the main reasons this radical cult-like group started. There was a big faction from this group that thought Arthur did not belong in this Academy because of his humble background. The fact that he was a professor on top of having the privilege of taking upper division classes fueled the already built hatred that some of the envious royal students had.

We weren't allowed to confront them as of yet because of the lack of evidence, and the fact that they haven't really done anything bad, but from the looks of it, there were even some professors of this Academy supporting them, making it all the more difficult to rashly make a move.

It wasn't until yesterday, however, that some of the radical group members started to act.

It was one of my classmates, Denton. We had the same second period together under Arth—Professor Arthur. He was actually one of the students that strongly opposed Professor Arthur teaching a class that was so important in building foundations as

this. However, he warmed up to him, rather he looked up to him now.

Denton... was found battered and naked while hung upside down from one of the statues in our campus for all of the passing students to see.

Director Goodsky was still away so her assistant, Tricia, and Professor Glory ended up pulling him down and making sure he was okay.

After being questioned, it turned out he had been taken to one of the narrow alleys between the buildings in the back and beat up by the radical group. From what Claire told me, they wanted to “teach” him how to properly use mana, since they didn’t really think Arthur would be good enough to fulfill the “potential” that he had.

My classmate ended up becoming a target dummy for various spells after resisting. After he finally passed out, they left him hung upside down, stripped naked, with a note covering his private part that he should drop out of the plebeian’s class if he didn’t want this to happen again.

Since then, having no choice but to act on behalf of Director Goodsky, Tricia has been trying to quell the anger from various elven and dwarven parents who thought this had to do with racial discrimination since the victim was an elf.

Needless to say, that student is taking a break from school for the time being.

Why was this happening? What was the point of doing this? What good does dividing students like this do? Did these students have such a low self-esteem that they needed to bring down anyone that they thought was better than them to feel better about themselves? Why was it that the more power and privileges someone had, the greedier they became?

Is it naive of me to wish for everyone to just work together for our continent?

A dark and gloomy atmosphere clung to the Disciplinary Committee room since the accident with Arthur. Claire and my brother didn’t speak at first, the both of them blaming themselves.

On top of that was the frustration of our actions being so restricted. Everyone was on high alert, as all of the DC upperclassmen were out for surveillance during the morning and afternoon while Feyrith and I took watch in the evening, with one of the upperclassmen helping us out instead of going to class.

Kai tried to find out their meeting spots but as soon as he had a lead, those places would always change. It seemed that they would relocate for every meeting, sending each other some kind of code for the new location.

The professors were useless. Most of them were all talk in front of the dissatisfied elven and dwarven parents, saying they'll do their best to find the culprit, but not being able to take direct actions because the human parents were also dissatisfied due to their children being accused of racial discrimination.

The professors were too tied in their little game of tug of war to be of much help. When they try to be on both sides, they end up being on neither.

That was the problem with a school so heavily funded by the parents of the students. The only one that had the authority to oppose them directly and openly was Director Goodsky and she was nowhere to be seen.

It seemed as if her disappearance had allowed this radical group to now openly make a disturbance... because she wasn't here to stop them.

I made it to the Disciplinary Committee room and walked up the stairs listening to Claire; the seat where Arthur usually sat, empty

"Things are escalating faster than we thought. I had a feeling that this was the case - the group is trying to create as much of an uproar before Director Goodsky gets back and then go into hiding temporarily after," Claire announced while leaning forward with her arms on the table. The dark bags underneath her eyes told me she hasn't rested since getting back.

I took a seat after everyone acknowledged my presence with a nod, too frustrated to verbally greet me.

"I talked to multiple professors about the situation like you asked, but it seems you were right. None of them were willing to actively help in finding the crux of the problem. They're turning a blind eye to all of this because of our 'lack of evidence,'" my brother reported through gritted teeth, running his fingers through his hair.

"We already know who one of the members of the groups are so why not just take that twerp and interrogate him? I doubt he has the balls to last even a couple of minutes before spilling out some secrets," grunted Doradrea while leaning back on her chair.

“Already tried that but Charles Ravenpor is never by himself these days; he’s always surrounded by at least 5 lackeys. It’ll be impossible to take action secretly with them there. Besides, we need to think about our actions from the entire academy’s perspective. No matter how many things we could get away with, it wouldn’t look good if a student was just taken in by us without proper reason,” Kai solemnly shook his head.

Thud

“What the hell is the point of having something like the Disciplinary Committee if we can’t do anything in cases like this?” Theodore pounded his fist on the table, tipping over a cup of water.

“It can’t be helped. We know too little about what this group is planning on doing and more importantly, what they’re capable of. We have too little information on them and it doesn’t seem like there’s only a few of them,” Claire sighed as she sat back down.

“...We need to wait for Director Goodsky to come back,” I said.

“Of course that would be the best thing to do, but we have no idea where she is let alone when she’ll come back,” our leader responded.

“If only Arthur was here...” I mumbled aloud.

My brother’s expression turned crestfallen when I mentioned him. They were both there and they were trying to stay strong. After getting the students back to the hospital, my brother told me that Professor Glory was planning on going back down with a reconnaissance team to look for Arthur. She said that there’s a high probability that he’s still alive if he survived the fall because most likely, all of the mana beasts in the dungeon were on the first floor.

“Kat... I’m sorry but we just can’t factor in Arthur as an element.” My brother tried his best in giving me a sympathetic smile.

“...He’ll come soon.” I must’ve said this aloud by mistake because everyone, even Theodore, gave me a pained look.

“ ... ”

“Umm, excuse me?”

Every one of the Disciplinary Committee members, including myself, whipped our heads at the unexpected voice coming from the first floor of the room.

It was Arthur's best friend, Elijah.

"Ah, you're Arthur's close friend, correct?" Claire, who had a pained expression on her face, motioned him upstairs.

"Yes, I'm sorry for intruding. I got to school a bit later than I expected but it's great that you guys are all here. Listen, I know you guys are worried about Ar—"

*BOOOOOOOOM!! * *BOOOOOOOOM!!! *

Chapter 79

Meanwhile (2)

ELIJAH KNIGHT'S POV:

Holy crap...

What the hell was going on? All I did was miss half a day of school; suddenly Denton gets hung up, butt-naked, and now a building was on fire?

We had all just rushed out of the Disciplinary Committee room after hearing the explosion. I thought that it was a spell gone wrong or something of that nature.

This... this looked more like a purposeful act of terrorism. Who would do this? Why would someone do this? What is going on?

"Fuck! it's them again," I overheard Theodore say as if he predicted this.

The 'them' that Theodore was talking about, was he possibly referring to the same people that beat and humiliated Denton?

KATHYLN GLAYDER'S POV:

I remember one time being lectured as a child by my home instructor. I have little memory of why I was chastised, but from what I was told, I had refused to participate in class with some of the other nobles' children; apparently, my mother had thought it was a good idea for me to make friends while I was learning.

That hadn't work out as smoothly as she had hoped it would because I had ended up throwing a tantrum on the first day saying that I didn't want to make friends with them because they weren't princesses like me.

Ignoring the kindly knitted words of discipline from the home instructor, I had barged into my room and slammed the door shut, refusing to come out.

Later that afternoon, after the other noble children and home instructor had left, my mother knocked on the door even though there was no lock.

She sat down next to me on my bed and ran her fingers gently through my hair; even though I couldn't remember how I responded, what she had said to me left such a lasting impression that, even as a six-year-old, I can still almost recall her exact words:

"My little Kathlyn, I know you think you did nothing wrong; everyone gets angry and fights for what they believe in. What I want you to know, my little baby, is that before you are a princess, you are a person. It doesn't matter if it's a king, a servant, a powerful mage, an elf or a dwarf. A person is a person.

Everyone is different and that is what makes everyone special in their own ways. Don't hate someone for something that they can't change. What if people didn't like you because you had round ears or because you had beautiful white skin? Or a perky little nose?"

She proceeded to tickle me in each of the parts she mentioned, leaving me in a fit of giggles.

My mother was sensible and smart but not in the least bit cold like her appearance sometimes implied. She cared for everyone as people, not as humans, elves, or dwarves. She disciplined my brother and me heavily when it came to any type of discrimination; whether it was social classes or races.

All of us bolted up from our seats at the sound of the explosions and immediately headed outside. I couldn't help but cringe, tightening my fists in both frustration and disappointment upon seeing the disastrous scene laid out before us.

There was a thick cloud of smoke rising from the area near the center of the campus.

Behind me, I could hear Claire click her tongue as she continued to mutter a string of curses under her breath.

Half of the recently-constructed building was up in flames, while the other half was crumbling down, collapsing beneath its own weight. There were students evacuating out of the building while some nearby capable staff members and professors were already going into the building to look for those stranded or stuck.

"I should've known they would aim for this building at some point," Theodore swore

aloud as he stomped his foot into the ground.

We hurriedly made our way to the site.

This building was named Tri-Union Hall. It served as both a museum and a monument for the alliance between the three races. My mother, who argued heavily to persuade the rest of the Council to erect this building was the happiest when it was first built.

She had explained to me that it had been built to be both a symbol as well as a place for the three races to learn about the differences in each other's culture.

For it to have been a target, my assumption could also only lean towards the same radical group that had been creating a mess these days.

I strained my eyes, holding my tears back.

Claire ordered Kai to go alert the rest of the professors and staff. When she ordered Feyrith and I to help the mages who were already there put out the fire before it brought down the whole building, I couldn't help but notice his expression turning from angry to dejected.

I almost wanted to apologize, as if it was my fault. Doradrea didn't seem to take this whole event to heart but I could tell Feyrith wasn't as emotionally strong. I wanted him to know that not all humans thought like this but somehow the words got caught in my throat. I was never good at expressing my thoughts like my mother... or Arthur.

While supporting the professors that went inside the collapsing building, I spotted the Student Council, minus the President, making their way towards the scene as well.

Without even the time to exchange hellos, we all got to work, the water attribute mages helped put out the fire while earth and wind attribute mages kept the building from collapsing. A couple of other student mages were already chanting spells in harmony by the time we got there.

I didn't use water attribute spells as frequently after becoming accustomed to using the more powerful ice attribute ones but I was still fairly familiar with the spells because of the affinity they had for each other.

"EVERYONE, STEP ASIDE!" From behind, a couple of professors were rushing towards us, wands already pulled out.

After a few moments of mute chanting, one of the professors that taught an upper division magic warfare class, Professor Malkinheim, conjured a thick cloud of mist around the whole building.

The other professor, one that I didn't recognize, supported Professor Malkinheim and used the moisture from the mist cloud, which now surrounded the building, to evoke multiple water streams. The size of these two spells from just two professors were more than three times that of the meticulously prepared spells conjured by over ten students.

Within ten minutes, the monstrous fire was out and other professors were rushing inside while chanting spells which raised support beams made of earth to hold up the crumbling portion of the building.

As expected of professors... they were on a different level.

This train of thought led me to be reminded of the time Arthur had completely overwhelmed Professor Geist before taking over his class. Just how strong was Arthur then? What would he do in this situation?

Shaking my head, I reprimanded myself for thinking of Arthur again. Why did he pop into my mind so often? I needed to stay strong for when he comes back.

He was going to come back, right?

I start chanting again when I spot a group of students hastily making their way out of the scene. I thought nothing of it at first until I got a glimpse of the student within the group - It was Charles Ravenpor.

Even from this distance, I could tell he was nervously darting his eyes around as he made his escape from the scene. When his eyes met mine, he quickly whipped his head around and quickened his pace.

Before I had the chance to do something, Theodore, who had been helping an injured student, spotted him as well, and without even a word, augmented his body before furiously dashing towards Charles.

"AAAH!! Someone help!" Unexpectedly, the group surrounding him did nothing to aid Charles, as he was easily grabbed and picked up by the collar, almost choking; instead they acted frightened.

Keeping my wand at the ready, I followed behind my brother who was also rushing towards Theodore and Charles.

"We need to ask you a couple of questions. If you would so kindly cut the crap and come with us," growled Theodore as he dragged the flailing Charles.

I usually didn't condone Theodore's rash behaviors, but this time - excuse me for these crude thoughts - I was hoping he would be a bit rougher with Charles. A small part of me, a very tiny part, wanted to stoop down to their level and use the same barbaric antics the radical group had to make a statement.

However, before Theodore had the chance to do anything else, a voice interrupted us.

"What's the meaning of this?!" Professor Malkinheim barked as he blocked Theodore's path.

Professor Malkinheim was of a scrawny build, with his main features being a balding head and a beak-like nose. You could tell the professor was rather conscious of his lack of hair by how he combed back the hairs growing on his side to try and cover up the bald spot on the top of his head.

Professor Malkinheim wouldn't physically be able to hold someone as thickly built as Theodore down, but he had his needle-thin wand pointed directly at Theodore.

"I should be asking you the same thing, Professor!" Theodore snarled back as Charles, who was helplessly lying on the floor, had a pleading look on his face.

"I wasn't aware that the prestigious Disciplinary Committee officers were mere thugs that would try to drag an innocent student away," Professor Malkinheim reprimands as his wand stayed trained on Theodore.

"Innocent?! Ha! This brat has been seen multiple times with the radical group you've been having such a hard time capturing. It can hardly be anything short of guilt by association. What, are you protecting a criminal right now?" I could tell Theodore was at his last straw as the ground underneath him started crumbling from his gravity infused mana.

"Eeek! S-someone save me from this brute! I'm innocent! I s-swear!" Charles, who was still on the ground trapped in Theodore's grasp, started whimpering as the ground underneath him started giving out as well.

“Theodore, I understand how you feel, but this isn’t the right way to do things. Taking in a student without any evidence besides your word will lead to repercussions from parents and maybe even the Council. Please, we can’t afford to be rash right now.” The voice came from another professor who helped extinguish the flames; she got in between Professor Malkinheim and Theodore, trying to quell the tension.

“Professor Genert is right. Theodore, we can’t go out of line right now. Too much is at stake to be reckless. Besides, there are more important things to do than this. We need to make sure that no one had been left inside that building,” Curtis said, his face a mixture of frustration and helplessness.

Thud

Wordlessly, Theodore threw the quivering Charles Ravenpor back towards his groupies. He gives Professor Malkinheim one last threatening look before walking away.

Professor Malkinheim just clicked his tongue in response and walked towards the other direction after yelling at the students who were spectating to disperse.

I shifted my glance towards Charles Ravenpor, who was getting carried away by his friends.

His disheveled bangs were covering most of his face but I swear... I saw him smile.

Chapter 80

Meanwhile (3)

CYNTHIA GOODSKY'S POV:

When I reached the clearing the woods, I heard the faint mumbling of chants with my enhanced hearing.

[Wind Cutter]

Dozens of nearly-transparent blades of compressed air whizzed towards me at a frightening speed.

Of course it was only natural that all of these spies would be wind mages.

I stood still, waiting for the wind blades to reach me before releasing a sound barrier.

Unscathed, I continued walking while I finished my second spell.

[Pulse Field]

FWOOM

The unlucky birds and rodent in the vicinity fell victim and dropped dead from the trees that they were hiding in; along with them, a few unprepared spies also took the brunt and fell from their own hiding places, clutching their ears in agony. I had the location to all of them.

Before I had the chance to send out another spell, I was forced to dodge a needle that managed to avoid my senses until the last second. Taking a quick look down, I could tell the projectile was coated with poison.

“Avier, take the ones to my right,” I stated monotonically.

‘Aye,’ my bond confirms back through mental transmission.

Avier descended from the moonlit sky, and before long I could hear the brief groans and howling of the spies that became prey.

A pity that their screams would never be heard.

On my side, I had to control myself to keep at least a few of them alive and able so I can get some information out of them.

In the end, only one managed to survive long enough to be questioned...

“GAAAAAAAAHHH!” One of the spies that was currently underneath me wailed.

It was fairly simple to torture him after destroying his mana core. Without magic protecting him, his body were simply too frail. I proceeded to crush his bones from the inside after giving him the chance to answer my questions. He remained unrelenting.

“Heh! You think I’ll tell anything to a TRAITOR? You made a big mistake. They’re slowly regaining their... former strength. Just from the questions you asked, you assumed this continent had decades left, huh? Pfft! the people of this continent... will have less than ten years before the war begins.” He smirked, spitting the blood congealing inside his mouth at my face.

My cheeks couldn’t help but cramp at the confirmation of my fears. Pushing down my frustration, I place my hand on the injured spy’s head.

His voice choking on the blood accumulating in his mouth, he croaked, “Long live the—”

Vrrm

Liquid brain matter began leaking out from his ears and blood started dripping down from his other orifices as the sound pulse I inflicted on the inside of his skull mashed his brain.

Dropping the lifeless body on the ground, I let out a sigh. Turning back, I make haste to my next destination, careful to avoid the corpses scattered on the ground.

“Do you mind cleaning up the mess, Avier?” I said apologetically.

“Human meat is too stringy for my taste, but I suppose it will have to do for now.” As

my bond said this, his owl-like body began to glow before transforming into his wyvern form.

With only the moonlight illuminating the woods, the sounds of bones being crunched echoed loudly. Avier feasting on yet another batch of spies that came from my homeland.

I let out a disappointed breath of air from the fruitless night as I wiped the blood off of my face while changing my outer attire. My years on this continent had made me too soft. The apathy that I had once built towards death and torture was gone, replacing it, a sour taste in my mouth from killing just a few brainwashed soldiers.

But even still... this was too easy...

Were they just a diversion?

Avier, who rarely let me ride on his back, carried me off to our next destination. I just hoped that my suspicions weren't correct.

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

The night before~

"Do you really have to leave again? You just got here." My mother heaved a sigh as she looked at me from the other side of the dining table.

"Brother, you're going away again? Are you going to almost die again?" my sister asked with a straight face, making her latter question sting all the more. I could tell she was pouting by how her left cheek slightly puffed out more than usual despite her trying to keep a poker face.

"Eleanor! Don't say such things to your brother," my mother chastised as she pinched my sister's cheek.

"Arthur, I consider you grown up now. I know that your decisions were made in consideration of your family. Father supports your decision to go... since it's for the sake of your love," my father affirmed as he gave me a thumbs up, the edges of his lips curling upward.

“Oh God, Dad, please stop,” I groaned at the misunderstanding of being taken as some kind of hormone-induced pubescent that had just been caught having a girlfriend.

“Hehe!” A giggle escaped from my mother’s lips. Despite her efforts to try and quickly cover her mouth and resume a serious face, it was already too late.

I could feel my face burning so I just looked down, shaking my head, unsure of which was worse: my parents worrying about me, or them teasing me like this.

Meanwhile, Elijah was quietly sitting next to me, wide-eyed, sucking his lips in to make sure he didn’t laugh as well; his expression seemed to be saying, ‘I’m not doing anything wrong. Nope!’ making me sigh all the harder.

“Kyu!” ‘Papa will be fine! I’m going to protect him this time!’ Sylvie hopped up and down on top of the table.

“It’s only going to take a couple of days, and I’ll be with Grandpa Virion; besides, next week is the Aurora Constellate, so I’ll be back home for a while. Like I said in the beginning, this matter is serious,” I tried convincing my parents who were already lost in their own imaginations.

“Well we can’t keep babying you forever; you are growing up I guess, in more ways than one. Just remember that it’s better to take things slow, Art. Though, I’m sure you’ll at least do better than your father,” my mother mused as she looked helplessly at my father who got caught off guard by this surprise attack.

My father, who had been doing his best in both his duty as a guard instructor and in his training, looked like he was just stabbed as the teasing comments pierced through his body.

I couldn’t help but give them a wry smile before looking at Elijah.

“Don’t worry, I’ll let everyone know that you’re still alive and coming back soon,” Elijah responded as he put his hand on my shoulder while giving me a rather dubious thumbs up.

“I will be back soon,” I reiterated while letting out a doubtful breath.

I stood up, giving each of them a final hug, which had become a sort of customary thing to do in our family. Sylvie, who was caught in my sister’s grasp, struggled to break free.

Taking a quick glance at both my mother and sister, I made sure they still had the Phoenix Wyrms necklace on them just in case.

Seeing the white-gold chain twinkle around their necks, I said one last goodbye to all of them and go into the carriage waiting for me outside, Sylvie scampering behind me.

Inside the well-suspended carriage pulled by a large horse, I began fiddling with the gold-speckled orb, trying to glean what exactly it was.

Every time I tried imbuing mana into the orb though, there wasn't any sort of response or reaction, almost as if it was just what it appeared to be... a marble.

Clicking my tongue in frustration, I put the orb back inside my ring. The ride to the teleportation gate would most likely be the only time I would have to get some sleep so I tried to make the most of it.

It is necessary King Grey...

It is of utmost importance to bring stability to our country...

To show the people of our country, YOUR country, that you are their King and that you fight for us, it is necessary to kill her...

Kill her, King Grey, so that the world will know not to trifle with your country...

Kill her...

GASP

I shot up from the carriage seat. The sound of my heart pounding hammered all the way up to my head, and I felt the cold air which leaked inside the carriage against my sweat-filled forehead. It took me a bit to realize that I had just been dreaming. Sinking back down onto my seat, I wiped the cold sweat off my brows as Sylvie, who must've fallen off of me when I woke up, jumped back onto my lap with a worried gaze.

As I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping that would help me get rid of the disturbing memory that I had forgotten for a while, I felt Sylvie's rough tongue on the back of my hand.

"It's okay, Sylv. I'm fine," I assured to her while petting her ears.

Why did that memory have to come up now...

Unable to fall back asleep, I talked to Sylvie to pass the time. It started from small conversations about her time when she was training by herself to teaching her about the various objects and scenery we passed by during the remaining duration of the carriage ride. Throughout the months, Sylvie's mental growth had been rapidly increasing. Her knowledge and maturity had long passed a human of her age.

I wished at times that there would be more opportunities to train with my bond. Having seen Curtis and his World Lion in duels, I could tell that they spent numerous hours training together.

When we arrived at the destination, the moon was still high overhead, illuminating the warmly lit floating city of Xyrus. The guard stationed in front of the gate leading to Elenoir Kingdom hurried over to us with his left hand gripping the pommel of the sword strapped to his waist.

"State your reason for passage and proof of verification," the rugged guard demanded as his left hand eased off from his sword, seeing that I was just a kid.

For some reason, his voice sounded vaguely familiar, and not just in a he-had-a-common-voice sort of way. Shrugging it off and pushing that nagging thought towards the back of my mind, I focused on the situation at hand.

Uncertain of what to say, I remembered that I still had the silver compass Virion gave me way back when I was a child. It had the insignia of the Eralith family so maybe it could be use as sufficient proof.

Wordlessly, I stuck my hand in my pocket and took out the compass from my ring outside of the guard's view and showed it to him.

"Hmm, I asked for the rea... th-this is the... right this way sir. My apologizes for being so disrespectful. I had no idea you had such close ties with the royal family." The crude expression was nowhere to be seen as he bowed down and hurriedly went back to the gate, activating it.

After the runes around the portal entrance glowed and started humming in a low pitch, he jogged back to us with an apologetic look on his face.

"Unfortunately, the gate can't immediately take you to the inside of the kingdom, but

it will be in a relatively close vicinity to one of the entrances,” the guard disclosed contritely, as if it was his fault.

“Mmm, that’s fine. Thank you,” I nod.

Hmm... it seems this was more than just a simple compass.

The humming coming from portal intensified, while the ancient magic runes opened the portal. I turned my head back to see the guard giving me an exaggerated bow.

As my right foot stepped into the portal and I felt the familiar sensation of my body getting sucked in; the guard looked up.

The rugged looking guard with scars etched on his face was gone, replacing it was the old man from the elixir store.

With a cheeky grin, he gives me a wink before saying, “Have a safe trip, young lad.”

Chapter 81

At Last

ELIJAH KNIGHT'S POV:

By the time the DC officers and Student Council got out of the meeting with the Professors, it was already late into the night.

I took that chance to tell them all what I couldn't earlier - that Arthur was alive and safe.

"Yes! I knew it! I knew he'd survive." Claire had sunk down on her chair in relief as she covered her face with her arms, probably to hide the stray tears that were sliding down her cheek.

Curtis just let out a huge breath of relief as he leaned back against the wall; but it was Princess Kathlyn's reaction that caught me off guard.

For once, I could visibly see her face brighten as she studied me to make sure I wasn't lying. I could almost see her chocolate-colored eyes twinkle as they narrowed to formed a rare smile.

"Thank God," she muttered over and over under her breath after I reaffirmed the information with an awkward nod.

"As expected of my *sniff* rival. Mhmm." The elf that kept insisting that he was Arthur's rival had a presuming look on his face as though he was the one that saved Arthur or something but the mucus leaking from his nose betrayed his expression.

"Heh, I knew the twerp wouldn't die from just a fall," The bear leaning back on his chair scoffed. Theodore tried to play it off casually but the half-grin he tried to hold back told everyone that he was quite glad.

Kai, I think that was his name, responded very indifferently with a smile that looked superficially drawn.

“Looks like I’ll get my dual after all.” The buff midget, too ugly to be deemed anything but an “attractive” dwarf, nodded in anticipation, her arms crossed to show off the bulging veins.

Ugh, I’m recalling some unpleasant memories again.

Fairly obvious that they were all relieved, they didn’t mind that he wouldn’t be back to help out with the situation at hand for a bit longer.

Just the opposite, it felt like they wanted this whole fiasco taken care of before Arthur and Tessia got back.

This was odd because, more so than the professors here, I felt like Arthur would be able to do something about this mess if our Director didn’t get back in time.

I had told the Disciplinary Committee officers about Arthur after the Tri-Union Building site was under control. Luckily no one died and only a few students were mildly injured. An Emitter brought over from the Adventurer’s guild healed them and they were taken to the treatment ward where, before their parents came, they’d give their account for what happened inside.

The atmosphere within the academy took a turn for the worse as there was a clear split between the students now. The newly admitted elves and dwarves were furious, generalizing that all humans were racist brutes, while the prideful human students had no intention of taking the blame for the actions of others.

The few human students that did feel bad for what had happened, ended up being ostracized by both sides. In the end, they just took a neutral stance, too afraid to say anything since at this point, the situation was too volatile; everyone was trying to find someone else to blame.

It was weird how people acted more recklessly when they banded together, like they got strength from each other. Both sides became more vocal after the building was put out and almost turned physical until the professors told them all to disperse.

Restless at this whole event, I ended up stopping by the training room that Arthur had allowed me access to. I normally didn’t use it, but since both Arthur and Tessia weren’t here, I decided it would be okay.

The guard eyed me funny but the front desk lady named Chloe was friendly enough to

escort me personally into the room.

“Haaa...” I let out a deep breath as I felt my mana core tremble in excitement to let loose.

Unlike Arthur, I’ve been learning a lot since I came to this academy; a lot of practical aspects applicable to my magic seems to work differently for me compared to others.

One thing I noticed was that meditating didn’t do much for me. My mana core developed and strengthened at its own pace and any conscious effort to refine more mana from the atmosphere doesn’t seem to help.

Even without any real effort, I broke through into the light orange stage but after reaching this stage, I just can’t seem to make any gains.

I clench my hands into fists and then release, repeating this motion as if my hands weren’t my own.

[Earthen Spear]

I feel mana well up in me at the activation of the spell and immediately a rock spike shoots up from the ground a couple meters in front of me.

[Earthen Spear]

I cast, this time with more mana imbued into the spell.

Two thick spears of earth shoot up at an angle in front of me. To be honest, even casting the name of the spell is unnecessary for me. It’s just become a habit for me so that I can keep a firm vision of what I want to evoke but if I practiced more, maybe I could even instantly cast multiple streams of spells at once.

[Stone Barrage]

This time, the ground underneath me crumbled as chunks of earth began levitating. After a couple moments of concentration, I will the rocks to shoot forward.

BOOM *BOOM* *BOOM* *BOOM*

Only four of the ten rocks I shot actually hit the tree that I deemed as the target, making

me a bit disappointed.

If I couldn't meditate to strengthen my mana core like everyone else, I might as well get better at controlling the spells at hand.

I learned in my Mana Utilization class what exactly affinity towards a certain element meant. For a mage with very little affinity with fire, it basically meant that mage had to be a lot more precise in conjuring the spell, which also meant that the vocal incantation of the spell needed to be longer. Each verse of an incantation that we chant shapes the type of phenomenon we want to have occur. For the rock bullet spell, a mage with little affinity would need to have a verse for each step he takes: beginning from the shape of the rock, the density, where it would be made from; if you add in a spin to the bullet you would need to have verse for that as well. Not forgetting the initial trajectory of the spell as well as if you want the rock bullet strengthened so that it would pierce the target or if you want it to explode upon impact; all of these would add up to a pretty long chant.

All these "factors" of the spell can easily just be imagined by a mage that has great affinity with the element. Mages stick with the element that they have the highest affinity towards so that they can best utilize their mana and mental capacity.

For me, the earth below me feels like an extension of my body; maybe it was because I grew up with dwarves but I always had this nagging thought in the back of my mind that even amongst them I wasn't normal. I didn't mean not normal in a genius sort of way like Arthur was, but in a freak of nature sort of way.

Well, I guess Arthur is sort of a freak of nature in his own way...

It was an odd little train of thought. Those facts about my body or my disposition wasn't top-secret stuff, but I didn't explicitly tell anyone either. I considered telling Arthur about the differences in my body, but I always missed the timing and it just didn't seem urgent enough to pull him aside and tell him.

It was good in a way because I felt like maybe, just maybe, I could someday catch up to Arthur if I trained hard enough.

Yeah, I know he's a solid yellow quadra-elemental mage with a dragon's will and he somehow has freakishly superb skills in close combat but hey, a man can dream, right?

I conjure more spells, half to practice, half to relieve the pent up frustration. I wanted

to catch up to Arthur, not because I wanted to be better than him, but because I wanted to help him. I felt like he always had his own battles he was facing. As his best friend, I wanted to have his back, whether through good times, or through war. I didn't know what sort of things he was going through but if I was going to be with him, I needed to get stronger.

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

I wanted to turn back, but it was too late; I was already inside the portal. The trip through the transportation never lasts longer than a few moments of unpleasant dizziness but this time, it felt longer... no. It WAS longer.

"Kuu..." Sylvie, who stuck to my head like glue began trembling.

'It feels wrong, Papa,' Sylvie transmitted, her inner thoughts traced with worry.

The journey through the transportation gate looked as though you were fast-forwarding to your destination. You're standing on a platform as a blur of different colors race by as the background gets lighter and lighter until you disappear into the light, exiting out the other end. It was a peculiar sensation that I couldn't seem to describe in words but this time, it was different.

The space around us distorted into a blur of colors like usual but instead of getting brighter, the color around of us drained and turned dimmer and dimmer, until it was pitch black.

'Papa, I'm scared.' Sylvie's trembling on my head was the only way I knew my bond was still there.

This was the first time Sylvie had told me she was scared. There were times when she was on guard, or alert, but she was never frightened.

The sensation of travelling through the gate that normally made me nauseous also ceased so I tautly augmented a ball of flame above my palm.

"What the hell..." It was bizarre. The ball of fire that was supposed to be giving me at least some sort of vision didn't do anything. Almost like trying to color in a red ball on a black piece of paper, it had no effect on the pitch black darkness.

VWOOOOM

I crumbled to my knees and I instantly augmented my body with mana.

I was scared.

What sort of monster was here that had a thick enough malicious intent to make me fall to my knees?

I couldn't stop shivering and the mana in my body dispersed, refusing to listen to me from the lack of mental control I had over myself.

For the first time in a long while, I felt like a child - an actual, helpless child in front of the boogeyman.

"Who's there?" I tried my best to roar but my shaking voice betrayed me.

Just then, a pair of eyes came into view out of nowhere. I knew exactly whom these pair of eyes belonged to. I was sure of it; yet, it didn't comfort me or help me in knowing at all.

The pair of glowing white eyes speckled with stars, that captivated me the first time I saw them, grew close. An authoritative voice that was devoid of emotion pierced through me, as if he was speaking directly into my ear.

"At last. We now have a bit of privacy to peacefully converse."

Chapter 82

Benefactor

LUCAS WYKES' POV:

"And what the hell is this supposed to be?" I raised an eyebrow, looking around inside the dimly lit room that reminded me of some crudely built wine cellar.

It was that poor excuse of a mage from the Ravenpor house that brought me here, telling me that it would be something I'd be interested in.

I normally would've blasted that sod away when he talked me so arrogantly, like he was doing me a favor; but I was quite curious, especially after the explosion of the Tri-Union Building earlier today.

"Welcome to one of the many humble dwelling that we use to hold our meetings," said a coarse voice. I was surrounded by at least 60 hooded figures, but only the one sitting lazily in the middle while addressing me had a mask on.

It was a plain white mask with two small eyeholes and a smile crudely drawn where the mouth should be. The mask was rather simple enough but the simply drawn smile gave off a sinister feel.

Charles Ravenpor, who was next to me, put on his own hooded robe and knelt down on one knee with his head bowed.

"Lord, I have brought Lucas Wykes like you asked," he said in a careful, hushed tone.

"Ahh, the famous Mr. Wykes, here in the flesh! So glad you could join us for our little... crusade!" he laughed, averting his attention from Charles.

I looked around. "I'm not here to join anything. I came here out of curiosity, but I'm not impressed. Who are you supposed to be anyway? You don't seem to be a student... Don't tell me you're a professor?" I scoffed.

"How dare you! You should be grateful that we even considered letting a mutt like you

join us!" One of the hooded figures to my right hissed.

"A mutt?" I echoed back, feeling a vein bulging from the side of my forehead.

I soundlessly prepared a spell at the ingrate who dared to mock me, but before I could finish the chant, the man behind the smiling mask snapped his fingers.

Fwoom

"AHH!" The hooded snob that dared called me a mutt suddenly combusted into flames.

I couldn't help but click my tongue. Even for insta-casting, that was fast... frighteningly so.

"Now, now. That isn't a very courteous thing to say to our newest member, right?" As the masked man, who was still lazily sagged down on his earthen throne, spoke, the fire had already burned through the boy's robe and was burning his skin.

"AHHHHH! F-forgive me! I was wrong. I apologize! P-please!" he begged as he was furiously trying to pat the fire off. Meanwhile, the other hooded figures were too scared to do anything to help him.

Turning away from the hooded figure still screaming in pain, I faced the masked man. "Before I decide whether I want to even join this little cult of yours, what is it you're trying to accomplish, and why do you even need me?"

I couldn't sense his mana core but it didn't seem like I was on the same level as him.

"Circumstances make it unable for me to personally act for now, so I need some capable magicians in order to thoroughly complete my plans. You see, I hate leaving loose ends," he explained as he used an arm to prop his head up.

"Taking advantage of your Director's absence, it is the opportune time to act so that by the time she comes back, it will all be too late," he continued. After snapping his fingers again, the fire suddenly disappeared, leaving the boy twitching from the pain.

"And as for what I hope to do, let's just say that my goals coincide with these folks and I simply thought that it'd be nice to kill two birds with one stone. Everyone here is a dissatisfied human noble that once took pride in the fact that this academy was meant only for the purest of lineage. While you may be a special exception to this case, I

would still like to have you on board,” he answered as if he wasn’t human.

“Besides, the whole ‘accept all’ motto that this academy now follows makes me want to barf; don’t you agree Mr. Wykes?” As he said this, the hooded figures all nodded fiercely in agreement. Just from his tone, I could tell that this guy was smirking behind his mask.

“Whether they make you want to barf or not doesn’t matter to me. Why waste my time and energy on bugs I could squish at any time? The peasants that were able to weed their way into this academy aren’t any better than the low class adventurer thugs that go around blindly flailing their weapons. Even the nobles that were brought up in the most pampered conditions aren’t worth crap to me. If this all that you have to say, then I have no reason to lower myself to be put on some leash and take commands from you,” I snapped at him, turning my back.

“Lucas~ what a hurtful thing to say. How could you ever compare yourself to some sort of dog tied to a leash?” He gestured by putting covering his mouth with his hands, sarcastically, like he was actually surprised.

“It seems like what I’ve heard is true. That you were a rather prideful mage that looked down on people of low birth. Did your friend, Arthur Leywin, not prove you wrong in this aspect?” The coarse voice playfully edged me on, making me stop in my tracks.

I whipped my head around. “What did you—”

“It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that, although you were hailed as a prodigy in the field of magic and have been pampered with elixirs and strengthening methods since your awakening, you aren’t a match for the child, Arthur Leywin,” he shrugged, holding his hand up.

I could feel my fists whiten in frustration, but he cut me off before I was able to refute.

“The sad thing is, he was never even trying. I bet even you always had a nagging suspicion that he had always been holding back, hahahaha!” He erupted into a fit of laughter as he clutched his stomach, legs kicking in the air.

“Who do you think you are?” I growled.

My body was already glowing as mana spilled out from my mana core, ready to fire at him, but I never did. This throbbing sense told me to not mess with him, like it was...

hopeless.

No! I'm Lucas Wykes of the Wykes family!

But who the hell was he and why did he talk like he was here the whole time, watching over us?

"I told you. I am but a mere benefactor that came here for the betterment of this land." As he said this, he got up and gave an exaggerated bow with his arms spread out.

Sitting back down on his crude throne, he continued, "Mr. Wykes, I believe that, even if our views aren't the same, we could have some sort of mutual benefits in this."

"Go on," I said through gritted teeth.

He ignored the fact that I was still completely surrounded by fire attribute mana, dangerously close to releasing it.

"Soon, I will be able to personally take part in this and when I do, I want to completely shatter the frail glue holding the three races together. However, until that time comes, I need your strength to help run things smoothly," he explained.

"How do you personally plan on splitting up the three races and why would you think that doing this would even benefit me in any way? Besides, you think the Council and the Lances were made just for decoration?" I argued.

"The Council is tied up with various things at the moment, and I've taken extra precautions to make sure that your Director is held up and out of reach. The field is set, Mr. Wykes, so let me ask you this - how would you like to have the ever so cautious Arthur Leywin fight you at his full strength, and for you to obtain the necessary power to defeat him even then?" He lifted his hand up, beckoning me toward him.

"Obtain the power to defeat Arthur?" I asked, controlling my expression to not look as dumbfounded as I felt.

"As long as you agree, I promise that you will get your hands on a level of power that you never thought was possible."

I looked at the hooded figures and could tell that they were interested as well, but stayed quiet due to the fear of being the next victim of the masked man's 'discipline'.

This was all too good to be true.

“If what you say is true and he has been cautiously hiding his powers to the extent that he has, how are you going to get him to fight me at his most?” I scoffed, unwilling to believe.

“Quite simple, actually, and it is also a task that I need to get done as well so it works out. Arthur is only human and he holds great importance to his family and his friends, but particularly more so to one person,” he says as he lifts his index finger up, the smile on the mask most likely matching the sinister expression he had as well.

“Tessia Eralith...” I whisper, unable to hide the smirk on my face.

“Yes! Tessia Eralith! An elf! On this sacred Xyrus academy, an elf is the leader of the students! Do all of you think this is right?” he bellowed at everyone so his voice echoed in the small dungeon.

“NO!” the hooded figures all roared in unison.

“She may not be here yet but I reckon she will soon, and most likely with Arthur. Don’t you think that maybe a bit of elf princess blood being shed ought to get your buddy ‘ol pal, Arthur, riled up?” he sneered as his hands ignited in flames.

I never cared for the elf princess besides thinking that she suited my tastes. I let her be since her body hadn’t even matured yet but it did seem like something was going on between her and Arthur. Who does he think he is anyways to think that he deserved someone like the princess of the elven kingdom?

He was just a lowly peasant.

As I began playing through the possible scenario in my head, I couldn’t help my lips from slowly curling upwards as I imagined his precious little lover’s life in my grasp as Arthur begs me to stop. The brat who always thought he was better than I was... on his knees.

I wonder if he’d lose his sanity if I were to slowly bleed her in front of him?

“Pfft!” I couldn’t hold back my laughter any longer. “Why the hell not!”

It was so simple! Why didn’t I think of that? All we needed to do was to kill the elf

princess!

Maybe I could have a little fun before killing her...

I began licking my lips in anticipation.

Chapter 83

A Greater Scale

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

“At last, we finally have a bit of privacy to peacefully converse,” a voice rang in my ear.

As soon as it spoke, the space around us began warping. Sylvie’s trembling became so severe that I couldn’t keep her perched on my head and had to hold her firmly in my arms.

Suddenly, in the midst of the chaos that was forming around us, we were in a blank white room.

I could feel myself gape, but even the words to express my confusion couldn’t come out.

Without being able to muster up even a voice to curse in surprise, I just idly waited.

In this white cube, it was only me, a quivering Sylvie, and the source of the all too familiar speckled pair of eyes.

By the time my eyes were able to adjust to the sudden brightness, I could make out the cat taking in a deep breath.

“Haa...”

Did it just sigh at me?

As I continued to kneel while clutching my bond, the cat I had seen at ‘Windsom’s Potions and Elixirs’ started shaking its head at me after a little while.

It really was the same cat I saw back then...

The peculiarly eye-catching cat was sitting in a poise manner, its tail swaying hypnotically as its eyes locked onto mine. As the cat’s gaze bore deeper into me, I

began feeling like some sort of raw material being appraised by a veteran merchant who was deciding whether to buy me out or not.

I snapped out of my daze and began looking for the old man to pop out. As I was about to say something aloud, the cat started glowing in a golden white light that spread over its entire body.

Interrupted, I just kept my mouth shut and waited for the surprises to end. For some reason, I felt like no matter what I did at this point, I couldn't stop whatever was about to happen. It was an instinctual reaction that for some reason I just couldn't ignore.

While the aura and demeanor of this cat was heavy and oppressive, I knew that it didn't want to hurt me; otherwise I would've been dead already.

The golden-white light began to change its shape and enlarge, changing from the form of a cat to that of a human.

Kiiing

As if it was made of glass, the sparkling human-shaped glow shattered into fragments of light, revealing someone I couldn't recognize.

"Greetings. I go by Windsom," The man sniffed deprecatingly.

The man that had transformed from a cat spoke with an elegance that matched his appearance. On the top of his sculpted face was a bed of short platinum blond hair that was neatly swept to the side. His deep-set eyes, that had not changed from when he was a cat, almost seemed to touch his permanently furrowed brows. There was a sense of nobility in his gaze as he continued to lock onto me.

While neither burly nor muscular, his square shoulders, underneath a military-like uniform he somehow had conjured on after transforming, told me he was a warrior... a fighter like myself.

His thin lips tightened as he let out another sigh of disapproval through his sharp nose. Peering down at Sylvie and I, he spoke again.

"I felt this form would be more appropriate for our conversation," the man announced matter-of-factly.

I opened my mouth to say something but I held back. If he just disclosed he was Windsom, then what about the old man who stole my money? I thought was originally the owner of the elixir store was just my own incorrect assumption. Then who was the old man? Windsom's attendant?

Composing myself, I let Sylvie down and stood up.

Dusting my clothes off I responded, "Before, we continue, I'd like to confirm a few things."

"..."

Windsom tilted his head to the side, thrown off by my sudden sharp and incisive tone.

"Since you lured me here for a reason and with Tessia as bait, is it safe to assume that she's alright?" I asked, taking the glittering marble ball out from my dimension ring.

After a slight pause, he replied, nodding, "Yes, your little elf princess is fine. I had already taken the precautionary measures before you made your way here. She should be recuperating to a certain extent with her grandfather back at the elf kingdom."

"That, on the other hand"—Windsom pointed at the marble in my hand—"is for you to keep."

It was my turn to be surprised at his unexpected reply.

"For me?" I asked.

"Yes. Do you know how hard it is to acquire an elixir pearl of that quality? Yet it went to waste on your little lover. In fact, it was too strong for her, which was why I had to waste another precious elixir to keep her body from... well, exploding." He let out another deep breath as he regarded me with the arrogance of a noble discussing politics with an ignorant bumpkin.

"Excuse me? Explode?" I sputtered, about to refute-

While taking a couple of steps toward me, he interrupted, "Well, I suppose without it, she would've been dead by now so it wasn't a complete waste. Still, don't give that one away and take the time to absorb the elixir pearl with your bond. It'll help with your training quite a bit."

Sylvie tilts her head in confusion while taking a look at the marble in my hand. Her shivering seemed to stop after Windsom controlled the pressure he was releasing.

I shook my head at this. "Shouldn't it be common courtesy to tell me exactly what is going on? Who or what exactly are you? Why did you bring me here?"

"Patience really isn't a strong suit of yours, now is it? Very well, if I were to introduce myself in a way that would be easy for you to comprehend it'd sound a little something like this; I come from the land of Asuras and am what you lesser races call 'a deity.'" Windsom's eyes remain unwavering as he said this.

"Deities? The deities that supposedly blessed the three races with artifacts that basically allowed them to eventually use magic?"

"Yes yes," he nodded impatiently. "Keep in mind that what I'm about to tell you dates back centuries ago, with any form of records or accounts having been destroyed or possibly having never been written in the first place. It is in our best interest that we keep it this way.

The extent of knowledge that you have lies in what the former elf king had told you. A deity blessing the three races with an artifact that eventually allowed future generations to learn what you now call 'magic'. That was just the outcome of what had happened prior; something that no one on this land knows about," Windsom continued narrating with his back ramrod straight, like he was lecturing a class.

I stayed silent, letting him continue.

"As you guys have recently discovered, there exists another continent in this world. The only two bodies of land that makes up the two ends of this world have always existed and have been protected and watched over by us. We Asuras are and have been governed by a doctrine, a noblesse oblige of sort if you put it simply, since the beginning of our existence. We are not to lay a hand on the lesser races inhabiting the land below, making sure only to act in times when either of the two continents fall out of balance," he let out a sigh as he turned his back toward us. "That was until we found out that this sacred rule had been broken."

The look I had on my face must've given my thoughts away because Windsom replied, "I can imagine the multitude of questions you may have but the information that I'm sharing with you currently is only what you will need to know at this point. We have

time, although not much of it, and telling you too much now will only distract you.”

Not much time?

It will only distract me?

Him telling me this only flooded my mind with even more questions, but I just took a deep breath and signaled for him to carry on as Sylvie kept looking back and forth between the two of us in confusion.

He gives a nod back and continues, saying, “Despite how you may refer to us as deities, we are far from gods... or rather, we’re far closer to you than you think. Much of the economy in Dicathen and Alacrya was originally mimicked after the systems of my land Epheotus, the land of Asuras.”

Epheotus and Alacrya...

“Of course, while Epheotus isn’t nearly as large as either of the surface continents, much of how the gears of society work is comparable. Epheotus was once divided into three factions that were made up of multiple clans in each of them. Boiling it down quite a bit, the ruling clan of each faction had their own nuance in ideals, which congregated the other clans to join either of the three factions. While ideals may have been different, every clan of Asuras still kept to the paramount creed that we were not to lay a hand against the lesser races. However, after Agrona, the successor of the Vritra Clan, came into power, things quickly changed.

The name Vritra rang in my mind like thunder. Vritra wasn’t the name of the black horned demon but the name of its clan?

“What was this Agrona like and what happened to the Vritra Clan?” I leaned forward in anticipation.

I could tell Windsom had to pause for a bit to gather his thoughts. “The Vritra Clan had always been an anomaly. It’s simplest to imagine them as scientists of sorts. While their innate magic is unique and versatile, it was never as powerful as the other clans’ mana arts. However, coupled with their genius minds and insatiable curiosity, they were always one of the central clans.”

“If they’d always been one of the stronger clans, how come things became so different once the Vritra Clan came into power?” I queried.

“A clan being strong and a clan becoming a leader of a faction are two different things. Again, think of the Vritra Clan as scientists, as researchers. The clan had very little interest in anything other than gaining knowledge and insight on utilizing mana. Like ivory tower residents, they were secluded knowledge seekers that only pursued what they could not yet comprehend; the previous head of the clan was even more so fervent in his quest to overcome the impossible. However, Agrona... he was different. While charismatic and intelligent, he was arrogant and power hungry. He believed that the Asuras were never meant to watch over the lesser races but rather rule over them as their gods,” he clarified.

Windsom’s face tensed as continued speaking. “After Agrona began leading the Vritra Clan, however, their strength abruptly increased unnaturally. No one could figure out how Agrona could advance the Vritra Clan’s mana power in such a short time. Eventually, through their rise in power, they were able to rally up more clans to share his ideals and the Vritra Clan soon led a faction on par with either of the other three factions.”

“It was only later that we found out that Agrona and a few other of the Vritra Clan had secretly been making trips to the Continent of Alacrya. While it wasn’t forbidden for us to go down to Dicathen or Alacrya as long as we concealed ourselves, their movements and behaviors were eerily suspicious. After the other two factions found out about this, they sent out scouts to figure out what they were up to.” I could see Windsom’s knuckles whiten by how hard he was clenching his fists.

“Agrona and the Vritra Clan had been inhumanely torturing the lesser races by experimenting on their bodies to find different ways to enhance their own abilities...”

Scenes from my past flashed in my mind at this. The different dungeons becoming corrupted, signs of traces of the black horned demons that kept appearing all clicked together at Windsom’s last statement.

“Being brutally honest, this information was enlightening and all, but what does this have to do with me? Why tell me all of this? I can’t imagine what could make a deity or asura or whatever single me out to reveal something as important as this.”

“You’re right, besides your own abilities, which is barely noteworthy by our standards, there really shouldn’t be a reason to tell you all of this. The only reason I do so is because of your ties to us,” he answered, pointing down.

“Kyu?” I subconsciously stepped in front of Sylvie to protect her.

“We’ve been searching for Lady Sylvia for years with no success, yet after finally finding traces of her mana, it led me to a little boy with her exact mana signature; what’s even more shocking is that, after watching over him, he held in his hands a deity. Arthur, you are currently bonded with the child of my master’s only daughter, the daughter of the highest level of power in the leading faction in Epheotus.”

Chapter 84

Lineage

The fact that all of this was somehow connected to Sylvia didn't surprise me. If anything, it just confirmed everything that I had presumed until now.

But...

Lady Sylvia...

The daughter of the highest position of power in a land of deities...

Even with my status as a king in my previous life, a figure of such stature would be someone I could only kneel down in submission to.

I felt a dry lump caught in my throat as I stared down at my bond. Of course, the possibility of Sylvie being the actual child of Sylvia was always there, but due to the circumstances of her being chased by the black horned demons... the Vritra clan, I could never confirm. The fact that Sylvie's appearance looked vastly different from her mother also didn't help.

Grandpa Virion's voice suddenly popped into my mind. He was the one that confirmed that Sylvie was a dragon. From what he told me and what I've read, while dragons were extraordinarily rare and powerful, it didn't mention about them being higher beings, let alone Asuras.

"So are the dragons written down in past texts actually deities?" I inquired.

Windsom faced me, letting out an impatient sigh. "No. While there are lesser races that have descended from us deities, it is rather offensive to compare us. I will put aside the biology lesson for another time, but there are general facts you do need to know. While there are special exceptions due to innate differences in each clan, in most cases, deities have three main forms. The humanoid form that I am in currently, a draconic form which is most likely the form that Lady Sylvia had used to pass down her will to you, and a third form which integrates both humanoid and draconic aspects."

“Then you’re saying that Sylvie has a human form?” I couldn’t help but point a finger at my bond in exasperation.

“Yes, but Lady Sylvia must have cast a seal on her own daughter, because the mana signature that she is producing is not nearly the same as it should be. Arthur, how did you come to meet her?”

“Before Sylvia was killed or taken away by the black horned demons, she gave me a stone that turned out to be what I figured was an egg,” I clicked my tongue. Explaining this made me recall some unpleasant memories.

“Black horned demons?” Windsom tilted his head.

“It’s what I described them as because of their appearance. From what you told me just now, though, they seem to be what you call the Vritra clan.”

“Haaaa, indeed, the Vritra clan is known for their prominent onyx horns... While this was one of the most probable outcomes, it also means that there is very little hope that she is alive. Arthur, Lady Sylvia undoubtedly put a seal on her child in hopes that the Vritra clan would not be able to find her.” For once, there was a twinge of emotion on Windsom’s face that wasn’t annoyance. I could see the sadness glazed over his eyes as he took a moment to gather himself.

“So does that mean deities are usually born in a humanoid form?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Yes. Our draconic form uses up a lot of our mana so we spend most of our time in our humanoid form. However, just like how I can shift into the form of a smaller animal, Lady Sylvia’s daughter seems to be in that form to conserve energy.”

“You keep referring to her as Lady Sylvia’s daughter, but she has a name. It’s Sylvie. I named her after Sylvia. Also, is it possible for Sylvie to turn into her humanoid form now?” I pointed out.

At this, Windsom merely shook his head before responding. “Most likely not. The humanoid form is the most natural for us, so if Lady Sylvia’s— Lady Sylvie, was able to transform into this form, she would’ve done so already.”

There was a torrent of questions flooding my mind now that I knew for a fact that Sylv was an Asura. Imagining her in a human form was hard enough, but what did it mean

for us since we were bonded? Did Asuras bond to each other in Epheotus? Although Sylv was the one that initiated the bond, it wasn't something that I can imagine doing to someone that looked like a human.

I knew Windsom would say something along the lines of, 'I'll only tell you what is necessary for you to know right now,' so I pushed those thoughts aside and pressed on what we talked about earlier.

"So since Sylvia, the daughter of a very important figure to you deities, did give her will to me, that makes me automatically involved in this upcoming fight that you guys are most likely going to have with the Vritra clan and co., right? Also, the fact that Sylvie, the granddaughter of the so called very important figure, is bonded to me begs another question... Are you planning on taking her back to Epheotus?" My eyes narrowed as I tried to read Windsom's expression.

"Yes. Dumbing it down quite a bit, that is the essence of what I explained to you. You may or may not have figured out just how mysterious and powerful Lady Sylvia's powers are. Even if you were able to unlock some of the mana arts only she could use, I doubt you were able to tap into a fraction of her true abilities. Arthur, even Asuras would drool in greed at the thought of receiving Lady Sylvia's powers. While even she wasn't able to fully control them, her powers had... have the potential to outstrip her father's." There was a look of longing and respect in this Asura's eyes as he explained all of this.

"As for taking Lady Sylvie back to Epheotus, while that was indeed our immediate choice, we have decided on a different route. Arthur, we will be entering into war with the Fallen Clans, the forces led by Agrona and his Vritra clan, soon. After the last war, both sides sustained immense casualties and had no choice but to settle for a truce. Agrona agreed not to touch Dicathen, but in return, we had to give up the Continent of Alacrya to him.

"While our forces may have stronger powerhouses, they possess too many unpredictable factors with the experiments they had time to hone during this period. The truce is losing its power as the Fallen Clans continue to grow their troops. We have already found traces of Agrona's troops in this continent. While the upper echelons of Epheotus would never verbally admit it, we need help and your future potential can play a crucial role in this. As long as you, Arthur Leywin, agree to be our ally, there would be no need to separate you from Lady Sylvie."

Even though Windsom was asking me for a favor, the way he looked at me dead in the eye made me feel like he was presenting me a role of the highest honor.

He had me. There really wasn't much of an option for me to choose. If I declined him, he would forcefully take Sylvie away and Dicathen would still most likely end up becoming war torn. With that, my family and friends would be in danger whether or not I became their ally.

He was basically implying to me that I was going to be involved in this war one way or the other. The choice was up to me on how directly I wanted to fight against our mutual enemies.

Letting out a scoff, I agreed. "Since this war involves the entirety of this continent anyways, I would be an ally to you whether I agreed or not today. Rather, what you were asking for is if I can be a pawn that would in your control."

"I can't disagree with your statement. You're wise for your age, Arthur," Windsom smirked. "I take it by your answer that you agree to our proposal. This war will change the entire balance of this world. If Agrona and his forces are able to take over this continent as well as all of its resources. There will come a time when even Epheotus will be in danger. That being said, we will need to prepare you. Your mana core is rather well developed for your age, which is a good sign. Training you will have to come after you're able to at least reach the white stage. With the resources we will provide you and your comprehension skills, I can't imagine it to take too long. After that, we will need to take both you and Lady Sylvie to Epheotus to train under the most optimal cond—"

"Hold on, I'm going to Epheotus? Your home? The land of Asuras?" I nearly shouted, flabbergasted.

"Of course. Do you think that my master will stand idly now, knowing that he has a granddaughter? Arthur, you are the last one to have seen Lady Sylvia. On top of that, she has passed on to you, her mana signature. You may not realize what that means but to us Asuras, it would be metaphorically pulling out your own mana core and giving it away. If she was forced to a state where she had no choice but to do this, we have no choice but to assume she has passed away."

"..."

“There isn’t much I can help you with directly for now except provide for you some resources to strengthen your mana core. During this time, I also have things to investigate and prepare for. I will continue to drop by from time to time and check up on you, whether I let you know I’m there or not will be at my discretion.”

“Okay, since it seems like this whole meeting is coming to a close, can I just ask you one thing?” I held my hand out to stop him.

“Go ahead.”

“How come it took so long for you to find me? If her mana signature basically transferred onto mine, wouldn’t either you or the Vritra Clan have pinpointed me pretty easily?”

“Because of that,” Windsom pointed at my arm. “When she first passed on her will, or mana signature, to you, it won’t show right away. You probably went through a phase where you had to get your body accustomed to it, right?”

I just nodded at this.

“Well after it did, I’m not sure how shortly after her daughter was released from her seal but when you put one of Lady Sylvia’s feathers around your bond insignia, it hid the presence of her will. I’m sure you only put that on your arm to hide the insignia mark or maybe because you thought it made you look cool—”

“It was to hide the insignia mark,” I immediately replied.

“Nevertheless, you did well in doing this.” Windsom shook his head. “Let me take you to where you were actually headed to now. I’m sure the elf princess misses her prince dearly.”

Even though his face stayed straight, I could feel the sarcasm in his voice. Sylvie and I wordlessly followed the Asura as the room we were in began distorting once more.

WINDSOM’S POV:

As I watched the child and his bond go through the gate, I couldn’t help but let out a strained breath.

Every time I see her, a mixture of emotions would boil up inside of me, making it difficult for me to stay calm. I wonder how Master would feel when he sees her. I can imagine how conflicted he might feel seeing the child of his precious daughter and the man that did that to her...

There would come a time when we would have no choice but to tell Arthur about his bond. About Lady Sylvia's daughter and the lineage she holds...

Chapter 85

Elven Kingdom

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

“Ugh...”

I stumbled coming out of the teleportation gate as I pressed my fingers firmly against my temples to keep my head from popping.

Sylvie scampered next to me, happy to be out in the open again.

“Kyu~” She let out a big stretch on the grass before looking up at me, signaling that she was ready.

‘That man was scary, Papa,’ Sylv’s voice rang in my mind.

“Yeah, he didn’t really come off as easygoing to me either,” I responded.

The place we landed at was a familiar one. It was near the area where Tess first led us to in order to get inside the Kingdom of Elenoir. Of course, this time, we were going to have to knock on the front gates like most people. It wasn’t too much of a problem to get inside the Kingdom now that the three races were more or less in harmony.

Every time I thought of the word ‘race’ I could hear Windsom saying in his annoyingly serious voice how we were the lesser races.

As much as it irked me, he wasn’t wrong. Compared to the Asuras, even I could see the innate differences between him and me, and from what he led on, it didn’t seem like he was the strongest of Asuras either.

“Well, I guess you know who your mother is now, at least.”

“Kyu?” ‘Mama? Aren’t we going to see Mama right now?’

“No, not that Mama. I mean, Tess isn’t your mother! Sheesh!” I exclaimed.

Sylv only tilted his head as she looked at me in confusion before scampering around again, leaving me flustered at my bond.

As we made our way to the front gate, following alongside the outer walls of the Kingdom, we passed the occasional carriages and wagons followed by people either transporting the goods inside or guarding it.

The economy was rapidly changing since the union of the three races. Opening up borders so that merchants can travel and trade with each other had led to a lot of unique goods becoming available in all three kingdoms. Once we reached the entrance into the kingdom, there was a line of people either riding horses and mana beasts or on carriages waiting to go inside.

Sylvie hopped on my head as I got to the end of the line beside a group of what looked like mercenaries most likely trying to sell the raw material they managed to obtain.

“Ey! Looky at the lil’ brat! Why you so far from your Mama lil’ boy? You lost?” A rather tall and thin, almost emaciated, man in a leather armor too large for him, hooted as he bent down.

“Roger, you’re going to make the boy cry with that ugly face of yours.” A girl that looked to be in her early twenties jumped off the end of the carriage she was sitting on and pulled Roger back.

“There is nothin’ wrong with my face!” Roger lashed out at his female cohort. “Besides, this brat looks to be some sort of rich noble brat! I betcha if we bring him back to his parents, they’ll reward us big time!”

“You haven’t said anything. Are you lost, boy?” another man, one that looked to be in his early thirties with a body built like it was meant to wrestle elephants pushed aside the drooling Roger that was staring at me like I was a moneybag, asked.

“No, Sir, I’m not lost. I have some business here,” I replied.

“Business here my ass! Don’t go try sounding all snooty tooty. I bet you just ran away from your Momma. Duke, let’s just grab this twerp and take him to the Guild Hall,” Roger smirked as he slowly made his way towards me.

I let out a sigh as I contemplated whether it was worth the effort to shove this bag of bones into the ground.

“Grrr...” Sylvie, who was perched on top of my head again, stood up, baring her teeth at the malnourished mercenary.

These fools were actually thinking of basically kidnapping a child here in the open...

While my stance remained the same, I imbued a thin layer of mana around my body just in case.

“Roger, Duke. Leave the boy alone.” A hoarse voice came from inside the carriage.

“Erk. It’s the boss.” Roger froze in his tracks with a reluctant expression.

“Tch. Let’s head back to the carriage, Roger,” Duke clicked his tongue and gave me one last curious glance before turning his broad back to me.

I just rolled my eyes and stayed put in the line for travelers without carriages that need to be inspected first.



“Sorry, Boss. I know you how you like to keep face, but this time, it would’ve been a totally legit excuse! I mean, all we would do is just keep the brat from talking and eventually, we would’ve just put him in the Guild Hall and sacked in a nice reward.”

“Sir, while Roger isn’t the brightest guy most of the time, I think he was right in that boy was actually from a wealthy family by his uniform and the peculiar bond on his head. If you didn’t stop us, I think we could’ve—”

“Fools! You think I was protecting the boy? I was protecting you two dolts from him!”

““...”

“Both of you guys are mages, yet you still couldn’t see the clear differences in power? Even I wasn’t able to sense the level his mana core was at!”

“But Boss, even if the boy was a mage, he couldn’t have awakened more than a couple of years —”

“Shut up. Just know that if you guys had stepped out of line just then, even I wouldn’t have been able to save you.”

After the first moment of reluctance in letting a possible runaway child into their kingdom, the guards erased their doubts when I showed them the Xyrus Academy crest since showing the Royal family crest might attract a bit too much attention for my tastes. Before entering, however, the elven guards did give me a stern warning that the use of magic was prohibited in all but the most extreme cases.

I didn't have the time to explore around much while I was being trained by Gramps so seeing all of this was new to me.

The city that we had entered was bustling with an almost chaotic mixture of people from all around the continent, laughing and haggling around different stands and small shops. The Elven Kingdom of Elenoir was different from the Human Kingdom of Sapin; since the entire Kingdom was walled off, the cities were more like giant districts rather than separated settlements.

Since the royal family's tree castle was located in the far end city of the Kingdom, it took me a couple of hours of travelling via a small transport carriage.

The driver dropped us off at the border just before the castle since no just anyone would be allowed directly inside. A major difference from the last time I came here was that there were now guards around the parameters of the castle as well. While I'm sure they always had guards and security, they weren't so blatantly placed to ward off intruders like they were now. Again, most likely an outcome of the Kingdom opening its doors to the other races.

"Stop. Little boy, I think you're a bit lost," a burly elf held his hand out and warned. He looked at me curiously before stopping his gaze at Sylvie who was now next to my foot.

"No, I know exactly where I am. If you'd be so kind as to let me through, it'd be much appreciated," I replied without taking a second glance at the guard while pulling out the compass with the Royal family crest Grandpa Virion gave me back then.

"How do you have this?" The burly guard squinted his eyes in suspicion as the other guards gathered around me.

"I thought that having this compass meant that a member of the royal family entrusted it to me." I couldn't help but let out a sigh.

When was the last time I was ever given a smooth passage these days? Starting from the teleportation portal to the mercenaries and now here.

“This brat. Is he being sarcastic with us?” Another guard growled.

“Sigh... just please inform either Princess Tessia or Elder Virion that a boy named Arthur Leywin is here to see them. They’ll know who I am.” I took a few steps back and leaned back against one of the stone statues that was in front of the manor.

“BOOOM!”

All of a sudden, a part of castle exploded and chunks of the building fell down on top of us.

“What the hell is—”

As the other guards jumped out of the way to avoid the debris, the one that questioned me didn’t have enough time to react after turning around.

I heard him click his tongue as he focused mana into his body, positioning himself between me and the falling piece of the castle wall.

While his attitude was crude, I guess he wasn’t a bad person.

With currents of mana already flowing inside of me, I conjured a gale to circle around us, instantly encasing us in a dome of wind.

[Wind Barrier]

“Fwoooooosh!”

The debris most likely wouldn’t have killed any of the trained guards but even with mana augmentation around their bodies, it wouldn’t have been a pretty site.

I kept my spell active, noticing the gaping face of Guard number one switching his gaze back and forth between me and the wind barrier.

All of a sudden, a familiar figure jumped backwards down from the ledge of the explosion site, landing just next to us.

“You guys alright down... Ah! Arthur, good to see you again, brat! Sorry for this, but you’re going to need to give me a hand.” As Grandpa Virion returned his focus to the site of the explosion, I dispersed my spell.

“Gramps, what’s going on? Was there an intruder?”

“Bah! You think I’d be having this much trouble if it was just an intruder?” Virion clicked his tongue in frustration.

“Then who—”

“BOOOOM!”

“Grandpa! Stop this thing!! I can’t control i~~~~t!”

Out from the giant hole in the mansion appeared Tess surrounded by dozens of emerald green tendrils made of mana swaying sporadically, destroying everything it hit.

Of course.

I couldn’t help but curse under my breath. I initially blamed Windsom since he was supposed to have cured her from the beast will that was trying to take over her body; paying attention, however, since Tess was still conscious and quite rowdy, I deduced that she most likely couldn’t control the mana she released.

“Tch. That aura is pretty frightening. Those tentacle-like vines protects Tess as well as attacks anything within its range. Even if I try cutting it, more tendrils take its place. Brat, I’ll support you from the back, try to reach Tess; my techniques aren’t really useful for anything other than assassinating and right now, we need a way to overpower this aura.”

I give Virion an affirming nod and take a step forward, concentrating more mana around me.

“Elder Virion. We can assist as well! Please instruct us on—”

“No! You guys would be useless against her. Just clear the area and make sure no one comes near here.” Grandpa Virion waved his hand without turning back.

I took a peek at the baffled guards. When I checked their mana core levels earlier, they seemed to be around the solid to light orange stage, which would be considered top tier considering their ages.

“But Elder, the child is—”

“Go. Now! I don’t have time for this,” Grampa Virion growled.

These elites that were probably never called useless in their lives muttered in confusion, looking at me with peculiar eyes before clearing the way.

“You know, Gramps, they probably still could’ve helped.”

“The less people know about my granddaughter’s powers, the better. At least at this point. Now focus, brat,” he breathed, keeping his gaze on Tess.

“Aye aye, Sir,” I smirked.

“Let’s go!”

At Grandpa Virion’s signal, we made a break for Tessia, who was on the edge of the mansion.

Augmenting my legs in wind attribute mana, I waited until a condensed gale formed underneath my feet before launching off from the ground.

Even though Tess’ back was faced us, the tendrils responded as soon as we got close. Immediately, the vines that were erratically swaying straightened up and shot themselves at us.

“Keep going! I’ll cover you!” Grandpa Virion shouted from the back.

While I had my back turned to him, just by the change in his voice, it was obvious that Grandpa Virion initiated the first phase of his beast will.

The two of us hacked our way closer and closer towards where Tess was struggling to gain control over the emerald green aura surrounding her.

I stuck with using wind spells, afraid that the aura would conduct any lightning attribute spells; and we were in a mostly wood environment so I held back on any fire

spells.

As soon as our wind blades severed the tendrils, it dissipated, another tendril taking its place.

It wasn't working.

I took a deep breath, relying on Grandpa Virion to cover me for a couple of seconds.

After finishing my chant, I felt a sizeable drain on my mana, along with a slight tingling sensation coursing throughout my body.

[Thunderclap Impulse]

The tendrils that were evidently growing in number and appeared to be overwhelming us in slow motion. Having the luxury to take a glance back, even Grandpa Virion's attacks slowed down enough where I could see his movements.

Dodging the tendrils, I avoided wasting mana on other spells until I reached Tessia.

Every step forward at this point involved me dodging at least five tendrils, until I finally reached arm's length of the troublesome princess.

Grabbing her by the waist, I prepare my final spell.

"Eek! A-A-Arthur?" Tess squealed in surprise.

Before I had the chance to respond, the tentacles suddenly retracted and gathered around the two of us before springing us off the mansion through the hole made by the explosion. With my technique still active, I was able to react in time to hold onto her before the two of us skyrocketed up into the air.

"KYYYAAAAAHHH!" Tessia's voice echoed loud enough for the whole kingdom to probably hear.

"Hold on tight!"

Locking my arms around her, I surrounded her in a layer of protective mana before casting my spell.

[Absolute Zero]

The amount of time it took to cast my spell took a lot longer without using the second phase of my dragon will.

As the layer of frost slowly spread out from around us, freezing the tendrils trying desperately to separate me from Tess, I had to keep my concentration to the max to keep the spell going.

“Break!” I roared before taking a kick at the completely frozen tendrils, shattering it into countless shards of shimmering little diamonds.

It was a gamble to try and freeze the tendrils that Tess manifested and, like expected, my spell wasn’t strong enough to completely freeze everything, but I was able to separate the tendrils from their source of fuel, Tess.

Tess had a glazed look in her eyes as she hung onto my neck, mesmerized by the thousands of falling ice shards reflecting the amber lights of the city,

Our eyes locked and Tess immediately blushed.

I gave her a playful wink in response.

“Hi, there.”

Chapter 86

Winding Down

TESSIA ERALITH'S POV:

Tell me I'm dreaming...

The last thing I remembered was trying to release the first phase of my beast will. Grandpa had been really surprised after he checked my mana core, saying that my body was somehow already fully integrated with the Elderwood Guardian's beast will.

I didn't fully understand why Grampa had been so surprised, but I remembered Arthur taking a few years to fully integrate with his beast will.

Hehe... does this mean I'm catching up to him?

No, we were just kids at that time, but he was able to smoothly integrate. Grandpa told me how amazing that was.

It wasn't fair.

Every time Grandpa talked about Arthur, all he had were words of praise. If it had been any other person, I would be jealous.

But it's okay; he's mine anyway...

Well not yet...

But soon he will be!

...hopefully.

Stupid Arthur! I wanted to impress him by being able to control the beast will he gave me.

So much for that... I completely failed and even destroyed part of the castle!

Oh my gosh... Mother and Father aren't going to be too happy when they see this...

And then he showed up...

Arthur just had to make his appearance at the worst possible time.

Now he's holding me like some I'm sort of damsel in distress! Though begrudgingly, I couldn't deny that I was in a sorry state...

I can't look at him in the face. I know if I look at him, I'll start blushing.

Don't look Tess! Don't look! Don't-

Dang it, I looked!

"Hi, there." Arthur gave me a charming wink with his blue eyes.

I can feel my own face burning like an oil-dipped candle but I can't seem to peel my eyes away from his gaze until we land.

"Sh-shouldn't you put me down now?" I managed to stammer out, giving it my all to keep my voice from cracking.

There was a twinkle in his eyes as he playfully smiled at me while he put me down. I knew he was enjoying my embarrassment.

Ugh...

"Are you okay, Tess?" Grandpa caught up to where Arthur and I was. He was sweating and had minor injuries from where my beast will's aura hit him, but thankfully, otherwise, he looked fine.

"Yes, Grandpa. Sorry for causing all of this mess." My gaze lowered to see that Arthur's right leg was bleeding through his pants.

Oh no! He's hurt! Sigh... I really messed up big time...

Flick

"Oww! Wha-?" I stared wide-eyed at Arthur who suddenly flicked my forehead.

“I’m just glad our troublesome princess isn’t hurt. Right, Gramps?” Arthur said.

Even though he teased me like this, his worried gaze couldn’t help but make me feel warm inside.

“Yes, my troublesome little granddaughter is fine. That’s all that matters. Who cares if she destroyed half of a historic mansion passed down in our family,” Grandpa smirked.

“Hnnngg...” I felt like I had shrunk half my size in embarrassment as both my grandfather and Arthur broke out into laughter.

ARTHUR LEYWIN’S POV:

It took a while for Tess to be able to look me in the eyes after letting her back down. As soon as Gramps called the guards back, we left the manor for them to keep watch. While the royal family's mansion was still standing strong besides the gaping hole in the corner, due to security reasons, Virion arranged for us to be taken to an inn, where it was easier for the guards to keep an eye out for any potential harm.

“I should let my son know about what happened in case he and his wife come back early from the meeting. They’ll probably assume the worst case scenario.” Gramps let out a deep sigh.

He was rubbing his temples as we sat down on a leather couch at a separate lounge in the first floor of the Spiral Ivy Inn.

I won’t lie. It was a pretty enjoyable sight once we got inside. Since it was just around dinner time, the inn was filled with indistinguishable babble and clatters of plates and utensils. Once they saw us, it felt like someone muted the entire inn as baffled faces of the inn workers and customers that were once eating dropped everything, including their jaws, witnessing the former king of the kingdom with his disheveled appearance carrying his granddaughter, the princess of their kingdom, entering the inn accompanied by an unknown human child

Fortunately, the inn manager quickly raced out, beating back all of the nearby elves and merchants courageous enough to horde us, and escorted us to the VIP lounge.

“I must apologize for this, Elder Virion. We weren’t expecting a visit from someone of

your status or else we would've surely made accommodations." The manager's posture was deliberately lowered, one hand cupping the other. "Might I ask what brought you to our humble inn?" he continued on.

"The manor is a bit... messy at the moment. We're fine here for now; just have a room for us to stay." Gramps waved the manager away after setting down Tess, who had fallen asleep on the way here. On the other hand, you can almost see the tail fiercely wagging from the ever-attentive manager as he nodded like a puppy that just got a treat from his master upon receiving Virion's directions.

I got myself settled on the couch facing Virion's as I laid the sleeping Sylvie who was quietly snoring in my arms by the time we got here. "So what happened back there, Gramps?"

"You wouldn't believe this, brat. I examined her mana core the other day and guess what... her body was already fully integrated with the Elderwood Guardian's beast will!" Virion leaned in forward. The excitement in his sharp eyes contrasted how softly he spoke to not wake Tess up.

"You can't be serious... How can her body be fully integrated with an S class beast—" I stop what I say as Windsom pops up in my mind. Were the orbs that he gave to Tess responsible for this unprecedented phenomena?

"What's wrong? Why did you stop talking all of a sudden?" Virion raised a brow.

"No, it's nothing. I was just thinking. Gramps, is that why Tess tried to release the first phase of her beast will?"

Virion let out a wry laugh at this while he scratched his cleanly-shaven chin. "We both got a little ahead of ourselves in thinking that Tess would be able to control her powers because her body was already integrated."

While the integration between the beast will and the host was essential in order for the body to fully adapt to a mana beast's will, especially for one that was at a higher stage than their own strength, it was also a training process of sorts. Through the integration process, you become accustomed to how the beast will might affect your body and how you can control its powers, even if it's a little bit.

Tessia was able to skip this long and arduous process, whether fortunately or not, preventing her from becoming exposed to what effect the beast will can have on her

when released.

“It’s fine now that everything has been settled, but Tess needs to be more careful when using her beast will.” I sank back into my seat, taking a long look at the princess sleeping.

“Mmm. I was thinking the same thing. Maybe getting a seal for her until she’s able to better control her beast will. It’s a shame that there’s no specific seal for beast wills; I worry that she wouldn’t be able to protect herself while her seal is on. Even if it was removable, she would be practically defenseless without mana protecting her for a period of time,” Virion let out a deep sigh.

“You could always give her some sort of protective artifact. If that’s not enough to keep peace in your mind, I’ll be there too, Gramps. I won’t let anything happen to your precious granddaughter,” I nodded.

“Oh I’m sure you’d protect Tessia even if she wasn’t my granddaughter,” Virion shot me a teasing wink.

We discussed a bit more about the potential powers that Tessia’s beast will might have until the both of us were too tired to continue on. Tessia stirred awake every now and then while Sylvie was so deep asleep that the only indication that my bond was still alive was by the rhythmic expanding and contracting of her belly.

We found ourselves in a luxurious suite with more than enough bedrooms for each of us upon reaching the uppermost level of the inn. The rooms were lavishly decorated in ornaments and trinkets with the walls intricately laid out with vines, giving the place a very fairy-like ambience.

Virion set Tess down inside one of the rooms and came back out to the living room as he poured himself a concoction from a bottle that I assumed to be some sort of liquor.

After wishing him a good night, I tossed Sylv on the bed as she kept sleeping, unfazed, while I changed into the loose silk robe that was hung up on the robe. Taking a deep breath my mind ran through the events of today. After the intense happenings as of late, I finally had some time to consolidate my thoughts. With some time to think, I divulged myself to what I seemed to have forgotten to do since being born again into this world. I began to strategize.

When I wasn’t training my own strength, I was constantly coming up with different

methods of handling my problems. It was essential to come up with a backup plan in case things went wrong, and a backup for the backup plan for when plan A went horribly out of line. I hated to admit it, but there were times when I catch myself regressing in the way I handle things. As the world around me became some sort of exaggerated fairytale, my mindset also turned into an immature and shallow child-like protagonist.

Streams of if-then scenarios played out in my mind as I thought back to what I discussed with Windsom. If things were really happening as the Asuras made it out to be, then I needed to prepare in advance. Advancing my mana core would be the easy part. I was more worried about what I'd have to leave behind, at least temporarily, while I started training.

Before I leave, I'd have to make sure that my family, Elijah, Tess, Grandpa... that they'd all be protected enough so that when the war starts, they can be relatively safe if I'm not there.

I thought about my sister, Eleanor. She was still making progress on awakening but it'd still be maybe a year or two before she'd be able to start learning magic. She and Mother had the protective charm I gave them, but that was just for that one, life threatening situation. It wouldn't save her repeatedly.

After running through different options, an idea dawned on me. It might be better at this point to maybe find a bond for Ellie. But it couldn't just be any bond or there wouldn't be any meaning to it. The mana beast needed to be strong enough and protective enough so that it could protect my sister's life... and maybe occasional discourage the weak-willed boys that are audacious enough to try and woo her.

Hehe...

The more I thought about it, the more I came to like the idea.

Hey, it would be pretty normal for a loving brother to get his younger sister a pet that could potentially maul anyone that gets within 3 feet from her... right?

Chapter 87

A Will's Unwillingness

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

Tessia didn't wake up until late into the afternoon of the day after. Virion had left in the morning to deal with what had happened to their home, and left a note on the other side of my door telling me to take "good care" of Tess until he got things sorted out. It normally would've sounded serious if not for the winking face he crudely drew at the bottom of the note, making me question what exactly Gramps' definition of taking good care of someone was.

And furthermore, what was going on inside his crooked head.

"Grandpa~?"

I was meditating on the living room floor with Sylvie still sleeping on my lap when Tess came out rubbing her half-opened eyes, bed hair ablaze.

"Huh? A-Art? Where's Grandpa?" Flustered after realizing it wasn't Virion who she called out to, Tess quickly turned around, frantically matting down her hair.

"Good morning, or rather, good afternoon." Smiling, I got up and handed her a glass of water. "Your Grandpa went back to your house in the morning to get everything sorted out."

"O-oh. Maybe I should go too... I was the one responsible for all of this, after all."

"There's nothing either one of us could do. Don't worry too much for now. Virion and your parents will probably be back here later tonight. We'll go back to my house in Xyrus after making sure everything is okay since we have to go to school tomorrow," I explained.

"Still... there must be something I could help out— wait what? I'm going to your house?" She still had her hands glued to the side of her head when she reeled back in surprise, once again unleashing her bed hair in all of its glory.

“Pfft~ yes. Virion asked me yesterday. It’ll be easier that way, and it’ll probably be more comfortable than staying at this inn.”

“I think my heart would be a lot more comfortable staying here.”

“Well, none of your family will be able to be here with you, so I’m sure Virion would feel a lot more reassured if you stay with my family until we get to the dorms,” I rebutted.

She stayed quiet for a moment before timidly nodding in consent. Even with her hair reminding me of an unkempt lion’s mane, she was still somehow cute.

“Kyu~” ‘

Sylvie woke up to the lingering scent of food and leeches a few bites to eat from Tess.

After finishing her breakfast, the princess sat down next to me on the living room floor where I was training where she petted Sylvie, who made herself comfortable on Tess’ lap.

“Hehe, so cute,” Tessia cooed as she rubbed my formidable draconic Asura’s belly.

“Tess, what did it feel like when you activated the first phase of your beast will?” I asked.

“Umm, it felt like a sudden surge of power spilled out and surrounded me. Then, all of a sudden, I couldn’t really move my body,” Tess explained as her eyes looked up and leftward trying to remember. “It felt like I was trapped in someone else’s body, but I wasn’t really scared though, for some reason.”

“Mmm,” I nodded.

The beast will wouldn’t attack its host so it made sense for Tess to have a lack of fear. It didn’t make sense, though, for the beast will to have such a strong sense of defiance. Even if she skipped the integration stage, Tess’ body still had fully fused with the beast will. The will might be difficult to control and to use properly, but it shouldn’t have gotten that out of hand. Ironical as it sounded, it felt like the beast will had its own... well, had its own will.

“I want you to rouse the Elderwood Guardian’s beast will.” I knelt down in front of

her before instructing.

“W-what? Is that safe?” Tess looked up, her eyes widening.

“It should be; you're not going to initiate the first phase. Just get a sense for the beast will inside of your mana core and let it stream out into the rest of your body. That way, I'll be able to sense more clearly what's going on.” I scooted arm's length of Tess, making the princess shuffle away.

Wasn't it her that so boldly initiated a kiss last time? Why is she being so shy now?

“I'm going to have to place my hand on your abdomen, Tess. Don't move,” I sighed, scooting closer forward.

“You make it sound like touching a girl's belly isn't anything serious,” Tess pouted, clicking her tongue.

“It's not if it's for the sake of training.”

“Tch...”

As she began meditating, I placed the palm of my hand on her abdomen, stopping my 13-year-old body's curiosity from making my hand venturing upward. Closing my eyes as well, I began examining her mana core. Soon enough, as Tess began to release the innate mana from the beast will, a flood of emerald-green particles of mana flooded over the golden gray specks of wood and wind attribute mana that circulated inside her body.

“Mm.”

Tess had a strained look as beads of sweat rolled down her cheeks. Small sparks of mana began bursting out of her body as her cramped face told me she was doing her best from releasing the beast will's power which seemingly wanted to break loose.

“Tessia, it's okay! Stop now!” I hurriedly yelled.

As the princess began trying to recall the beast will back into her mana core, she began convulsing. As I put my hand back to her mana core to try and sense the activity going on inside of her body, I couldn't help but be shocked.

The Elderwood Guardian's beast will that occupied Tess' mana core and was integrated with the rest of her body was fighting back, trying to take control over the rest of Tess' innate mana.

What was going on? How could the beast will go against the host's will like this? This was different from Tess actually manifesting the first phase of her beast will and having that go out of control. The beast will's mana particles were still inside of her body when this happened.

A rather crude comparison popped into mind while thinking of this. People of this world didn't really suffer from this, but from my world, nonpractitioners who couldn't reinforce their body with ki suffered from diseases and illnesses. While there were horrible diseases that aged the body twice as fast or burned the organs from the inside, I would have to say that the scariest disease would be the Drackins Virus. This virus would spread through the nerves and make the victim lose control of their limbs and eventually their mind. Since the virus couldn't infect practitioners it was contained fairly quickly, but even then, the epidemic that lasted a year had over three hundred thousand fatalities.

This phenomenon that was happening to Tess reminded me of something akin to that virus. Just like the Drackins Virus, the beast will's mana particles weren't integrating and reinforcing Tess' body, but instead weakening the mana formed from her own mana core. It didn't seem to the degree of taking over Tess' body and mind at this stage, but it was still eerily comparable.

As the internal battle between Tess' innate mana and her beast will ensued, I could sense the mana levels in her core slowly dwindling. The beast will was clearly less rampant than when we were at the training grounds back in Xyrus Academy; whether that was thanks to the help of Windsom, I couldn't be sure. However, I doubt even Windsom predicted that the Elderwood Guardian's beast will that I acquired would be such an unpredictable outlier.

As Tess continued to fight, trying contain the beast will that wasn't even fully released, I gathered some mana into her body as well, making sure to incorporate all four elemental attributes so it wouldn't be rejected, before transferring it directly to her mana core. While I didn't give as much mana to Tess as I did to Prince Curtis back down at the dungeon, I still felt a tangible drain from my core.

Meanwhile, Sylvie circled around us, wearily, knowing that something was wrong. She

tilted her head and peeked around me, trying to get a better view of what was going on until Tess collapsed on her back, her chest rising and falling from the shortage of breath.

“Well, that didn’t go quite as planned,” I huffed, leaning back on my arms as well.

“Tell... tell me about it. I don't get what's wrong though. It feels like I'm holding onto a gate, trying to keep some sort rabid monster caged inside from breaking free.”

I couldn't help but let out a wry laugh at the accuracy of such a metaphor. Tess' mana core quite literally was serving as the “cage” that kept the rabid beast will from coming loose.

With still a pile of questions unanswered, we decided not to touch the Elderwood Guardian's beast will for the time being. We were either going to have to find an unconventional way to have her gain control over this power or have her become stronger in order properly keep the beast will in check.

Grandpa Virion, along with Tessia's parents, Alduin and Merial Eralith, arrived at the inn suite later in the evening. Needless to say, the former King and Queen of the elves were relieved seeing for themselves that their daughter was safe.

The five of us and Sylvie, who was curled up on my lap, sleeping, situated ourselves on the couches before getting into the topic of what's to come.

We discussed briefly about what happened exactly at the castle, but when Tess tried to chime in, Virion cut her off and explained in her stead. Gramps played the whole thing down, mentioning that part of the explosion was actually his fault and that he was just trying to test the limits of Tess' beast will.

I sat there, perplexed for a moment as to why he might have been hiding the true reason, but when our eyes met, his gaze told me that he would explain later.

It was decided that, while the Eralith castle was being rebuilt, the family, minus Tess, would stay with Rinia.

Now that was a name that I hadn't heard in a long time. I owed a lot to the granny that had the extremely rare gift of foresight. She was the one that allowed me to make contact with my parents after first arriving at the Kingdom of Elenoir after rescuing Tess at the time.

“Arthur, why don’t we go together to Rinia’s house before you and Tessia set out for Xyrus? The journey is a bit far after she moved but since you saw her as a child, I’m sure she’d appreciate it if you came by and said hello,” Merial chimed. “She is going to be very surprised at how much you’ve grown.”

“I’d like that,” I responded back with a nostalgic smile reaching my cheeks.

“Ooh, I haven’t seen Grandma Rinia in a long time too!” Tessia leaned forward, her expression indicating that she was looking forward to it as well.

“Hmm, while you’re at it, having her get a good read on you should be a good idea.” Virion’s gaze was focused on some random spot on the ground as he pondered at the idea.

Alduin nodded in agreement before saying, “Yes, I think so too. Father, I remember you telling me how Rinia was rather interested in Arthur's future.”

After that, it was decided that before leaving for Xyrus early in the afternoon, we’d stop by Grandma Rinia’s house, or cottage to be more precise.

Needless to say, it was odd. I, myself, was sleeping on the same bed with Grandpa Virion while Tess and her parents slept in the other room. I was rather fine with it but sleeping in the same quarters as the royal family of the elves would put anyone else on pins and needles. I still wanted to sleep in the living room, for comfort’s sake, but Gramps refused, saying that only through sharing tight quarters do men truly bond.

That and bathing together in the nude...

Supposedly...

Elves have some weird customs.

Chapter 88

A Stroll

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

As we made our trip to Rinia's cottage, I couldn't help but sigh in awe at how perfect a spring morning it was; simply one of those scenes that you couldn't help but appreciate. As it was just past dawn, the morning air was still cool and crisp. On both sides of the road, bright morning dew on the moss-covered rocks sparkled from the Sun's rays peeking through the old trees that seemed to tower over us.

The carriage we were riding in hardly shook from the even, marble-like paths smoothed from centuries of use. Sylvie was a ball of excitement as I had to grab her by the tail a couple of times to keep her from jumping out of the carriage to catch the passing butterflies and birds.

Sylvie surprised the royal family when she, while still in my grasp, shot out a small blast of fire, charring the curious bird that was unfortunate enough to fly too close.

"Arthur, I have to say that your bond continues to intrigue me." Alduin Eralith raised an amused brow as Sylvie promptly shot out and grabbed the bird with her jaw as it fell.

"Now now, leave the boy and his pet alone. In such a vast and mysterious land as ours, you can't be so surprised at things like this," Virion chided at his son with a wagging finger.

"I'd normally agree with you as well, Grandfather, but Arthur's bond really is unique compared to all of the other mana beasts I've seen. Even though it's an infant, its gaze twinkles with intelligence." Merial leaned in closer to Sylvie, who was still chewing on the bird she shot down.

"Don't forget that Sylvie is super cute too!" Just as Sylvie let out a satisfied belch, Tess picked her up and hugged her.

"Bahaha! I can't help but worry that my granddaughter will one day choose her

precious bond, not by its strength but by its appearance!" Virion howled in laughter, making everyone but the princess snicker in agreement.

The trip was fairly long, even with a mana beast pulling the carriage. Tessia soon fell asleep with her head against her mother's shoulder, as Merial slept alongside her daughter with her head leaning against Tess'.

"Arthur, I told my son this already but where we're headed, it's not a normal cottage. Rinia, for some reason, chose to isolate herself near the edge of the kingdom. As for why, she wouldn't tell me, but last time I chose to make an unannounced visit, I almost died from the traps and defenses she put up," Virion spoke in a hushed voice.

I raised a brow at Virion's serious tone. "For what reason does Elder Rinia need to protect herself to this extent?"

"My guess is as good as yours. I told her that we were visiting this time, so it should be safe, but I want you to watch out for any signs of intrusion. The fact that she needed to set up all of these precautions means that there are people out there to be cautious of."

My mind immediately went to her unique abilities as a deviant, however, no one but a handful of trusted people should've known about it.

"Okay." I nodded solemnly.

Soon after the conversation, Gramps had also fallen asleep with his arms crossed and head bobbing, leaving only my bond, the driver, Tess' father and myself, awake.

Sylvie had her front paws against the window of the carriage in hopes to catch more unlucky birds, her tail wagging rhythmically.

Alduin had a relaxed look on his aged face as he gazed vacantly at the moving scene outside the carriage. I knew that each of those wrinkles and creases came from the burden of being a king and now a leading figure of the continent.

"I feel like I've never had the chance to properly thank you," he said as his eyes still stayed focused outside of the carriage.

"For what, sir?" I replied.

“For taking such good care of my daughter. From what she and father tells me, Tessia made it out of some dangerous situations thanks to you.” Alduin turned his head and looked at me for a brief moment before revealing a weary smile.

“It’s nothing, sir. Tessia has helped me a lot of times as well.”

“Oh? Like how?” he tilted his head.

I had to think to for a second before responding. “In keeping me sane at times.”

“Not exactly what I expect a thirteen-year-old boy to say, but when it comes to you, I can’t help but see you as an adult.” The former king smirked before shifting his gaze back outside.

“Your words are kind.”

“I somehow feel utterly confident that you will be able to protect my daughter in my and my father’s stead.”

My eyes narrowed in thought at the meaning of his statement, but before I could say anything, Alduin just chuckled and waved his hand dismissively.

“Just an overprotective father’s thoughts running wild. Don’t mind me, Arthur... but say, have you ever thought of one day marrying Tess?”

“Sir?” I said, taken aback by the sudden shift in course of this conversation.

“I mean, sure, she’s a bit rough around the edges and Merial and I may have spoiled her a bit, but she’s a good girl! I bet she’ll be quite the looker given a few years.”

“I thought that traditionally, elves dated and married a lot later—”

“Ha! Tradition? At how fast Dicathen is changing, there’s no room for tradition,” Alduin scoffed.

“...”

“Arthur, do you like my daughter?” He bent forward, leaning his arms on his knees.

“...yes.” I hesitated at first but I replied confidently. There was no denying what my

feelings for the elf princess were. The inner voice of reason that made me back away from falling in love with a child was beginning to dissipate. Of course, this didn't mean that I would boldly profess my love and consummate my feelings for her, but I wasn't going to use my mental age as an excuse.

"Good!" Alduin nodded as a row of perfect teeth revealed underneath a charismatic smile.

'Hehe, I knew Papa liked Mama.' Sylvie's voice rang in my head, surprising me.

I took a peek at Tess to make sure she was still asleep before reaching for my bond.

TESSIA' ERALITH'S POV:

He admitted it! I almost shouted out loud in excitement.

Arthur finally said it! He said he likes me. Well... he said yes after he was asked, but that's good enough!

Way to go, Dad!

Oh no, keep your eyes shut, Tess... keep your eyes shut.

Slow down your breathing.

Shoot, I wonder if he can hear how fast my heart is beating. His hearing can't be that good, right?

I'm so happy that I woke up when I did. I wasn't going to pretend to be asleep at first, but I got scared when I heard Father talking about me.

He's so cruel... how can he say that I'm rough around the edges...

...and that I'm spoiled! I'm not spoiled!

It would be embarrassing to wake up just then, so I kept my eyes closed, but who would've thought that my father would ask if Arthur likes me... and that Arthur actually admit it!

He's only said that once, and that was after I got angry at him. He surprised me when he kissed me all of a sudden.

Hehe...

Oh no, don't smile, Tess.

"We're here, Tess. Come on, now, wake up." My father's voice saved me as he gently shook my shoulder.

"Mmm... We're here already?" I made my voice wispier, trying to sound like I just woke up.

My mother was also stirring awake as my father gently grabbed her hand. As soon as she realized she had fallen asleep, she had an embarrassed look on her face.

"Dear me, I showed you an embarrassing sight, Arthur." She said as she combed her hair down with her fingers.

"Haha, it's absolutely fine, Ma'am. Elder Virion was over here, snoring with his mouth open." Arthur jabbed his elbow at Grandpa who just looked at him in confusion.

I couldn't look at Arthur in the eye when he turned his gaze to me so I quickly got out of the carriage and stretched.

"Ahhh! That was a good nap!" I said a little more loudly than I needed to.

Sylvie hopped out of the carriage after me and stretched as well, opening her mouth in an audible yawn before darting her head, taking in her new surroundings.

I looked around too, but I was confused when I didn't see a cottage, or any sort of sign that a person lived here. All that surrounded us were trees and grass, with thick bushes that blocked any sort of path there might've been.

"Umm, Grandpa, are you sure we're in the right place?" I asked as I continued searching for anything remotely close to a house.

"We have to walk a bit further, but it's near here. Let's go." Grandpa took the lead with my father and Arthur following close behind, while Mother ushered me forward as well.

Sylvie scampered alongside me, her head darting back and forth in different directions, as if it sensed something, making me a bit nervous.

As we made our way deeper into the forest the number of branches we had to maneuver around and curtains of vines we had to push aside increased. I wanted to ask if we were really going the right direction but the determined and serious look on everyone's faces made me swallow my complaints.

"Honey? Is something wrong? The atmosphere is a bit chilly..." Mother's voice trailed off as she hesitantly followed behind the guys next to me.

"Mm? Ah, yes. Everything is fine! Just being cautious is all." My father seemed to have snapped out of his thoughts at the sound of Mother's words.

"Stop." Arthur suddenly put up his hand up abruptly, his other hand gripping the hilt of his sword that I didn't even notice he had until now. Grandpa, who was beside him, froze, lowering himself as father carefully inched his way towards us.

I could hear it now in the dead silence.

The faint rustle of leaves that seemed to be getting closer to us.

"Snap."

Grandpa whipped his body toward the direction of the sound.

I noticed myself scooting towards Mother for protection. With my mana core unstable because of my beast will, I felt defenseless for the first time in a long while.

My mother was also wary at this point. Both she and Father had their weapons out and at the ready. My mother's thin wand glimmered in a rose gold hue as my father's favorite sabre was already unsheathed.

"Snap!"

The sound was a lot closer this time and it seemed to be coming from our right. Unknowingly, I glanced at Arthur to find his eyes on me, probably making sure I was alright. Sylvie was right next to him with her white fur on its ends, making her look bigger.

And then we all saw it. The curtain of vines to our right began rustling and a hunched figure covered in shade stepped out from the dense forest.

I could tell everyone were on their toes, ready to retaliate at whatever came out, but before anyone had the chance to, a clear voice rang from the shadowed figure.

“What are you lot doing out here looking like fools? Come on, you guys are late!”

The shadowed figure finally stepped into a ray of light that peeked through the trees, revealing an all too familiar figure.

“Grandma Rinia!” I couldn’t help but exclaim in relief.

Chapter 89

A Cursed Blessing

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

Supposedly, Grandma Rinia's cottage wasn't too much farther from where we were. After our brief greetings and a firm hug from the aged elf that I had come to appreciate, we made our way to her dwelling place.

"You've grown into quite the handsome young lad, Arthur. If I was just a hundred years younger, I might've snatched you up for myself," Rinia teased.

It was disturbing to say the least to hear this from a woman who was almost three times my age, but coming from her, I just grinned back.

"Well, I'd have to see how you looked when you were a hundred years younger."

"Hmph! Ask Virion how stunning I was! Men would swarm over me as soon as I was in their sights!" Rinia places one hand on her hip and uses her other to flip her braided hair.

"It's true, Arthur. My mother would tell me how all of the girls her age would be jealous of Aunt Rinia," Tess' mother giggled.

"Bah! She was above average at best!" Virion waved off.

"Well, of course there was only one girl to have ever caught Virion's eye..." Rinia's voice trailed off and by the look on her face, she seemed to have regretted bringing it up.

I looked around, completely lost. The gloomy forest we were treading through seemed all the more dismal by the sudden change in the air. I glanced at Tess and she seemed uncomfortable, but more so confused than depressed like everyone else.

"...I'm sorry, Virion. I was a bit insensitive." Rinia placed a hand on Virion's sunken shoulder.

“It’s... It’s fine. I should be the one who’s sorry. I know how you felt as well,” He dismissed.

We continued on with only the crunching sound of fallen leaves and the snapping of twigs filling the silence. My gaze was focused on Sylvie, who was having a blast looking for lifeforms underneath the moss-covered rocks and logs.

As her tail wagged furiously in excitement, I couldn’t help but let out a small smile in content, despite the sullen atmosphere.

Sneaking a quick peek at Gramps, my mind started itching with questions that I knew I shouldn’t ask. Rinia, who apparently saw this, gently placed her hand on my shoulder and gave me a strained smile.

As we stepped into a small clearing, a roaring sound of running water filled our ears. It was as if the trees surrounding this area had acted as a barrier, blocking off all the sound. In view, we could now see a wide waterfall cascading down a marble white cliff into a small pool of water about six meters in diameter.

“Wow, I didn’t know a place like this existed,” Tess gaped in awe.

“Father, wasn’t this the place you used to take me to when I was a child?” Alduin asked while he looked around.

“I see you still remember. Yes, you used to love coming to this place.” Virion let out a small smile as he reminisced.

“It’s beautiful...” Merial breathed.

It was beautiful indeed.

There wasn’t much sunlight that was able to reach this small clearing, making the area seem more surreal. The thin rays of light that were able to peek through the thick tree tops created spotlights that made the moss, grass, and all of the plant life glimmer. The waterfall streamed down the white cliff without any intrusion, making it a clear curtain of water.

“We’re here.” Rinia stated as she stepped up.

Wordlessly we all followed her as I half expected her to conjure a cottage from the

ground.

It wasn't as fancy as that, though. Instead Rinia let out a few inaudible chants with her hands raised, raising up roots from underneath the pond into a makeshift bridge leading into the waterfall.

Carefully stepping onto the grimy roots, Rinia took the lead with us following close behind. With a wave of her arm, she swept the waterfall to the side. However, before doing anything else, she looked around, as if to make sure no one was spying on us.

After letting out a sharp breath, Rinia placed her hand on the cliff behind the waterfall, which now started to glow with unrecognizable runes.

Just like that, the white marble cliff opened up like a sliding door to reveal a passage deeper inside.

"Don't conjure up any light; we'll make our way through the dark," Instructed Rinia, as if directly referring to me.

I lost track of how many turns we made, relying on only Rinia guiding us with her voice.

"Left."

"Right."

"Right."

"Left."

Finally we could see a flickering light at the end of the umph leg of the tunnel.

"Welcome to my little cottage." With the sparse amount of light, I could barely make out the faint smile Rinia had.

By this time, I had no idea where we were, but the homey little hut that couldn't be any bigger than a single room in the Eralith family's castle was welcoming to my eyes.

"Whew." Tessia squatted down as she was able finally release her tension.

“This... this is quite the place, Aunt Rinia.” Alduin slid his hand against the wall of the cave the hut was in.

“Where are we?” I couldn’t help but ask as I inspected our surroundings as well.

“Somewhere in the elf kingdom.” Was all she said as she made her way into her hut.

Lighted by a few dim shining orbs in the corners of the cave, the place Rinia called home reminded me of some sort of dungeon used to hold the worst criminals, not a place where a close friend of the royal family would reside.

“I’m sure you have your reasons, Aunt Rinia, but was it really necessary to shut yourself in a place like this?” Merial frowned as her eyes focused on the hut Rinia just went inside to.

“Just an old lady being overly cautious. Don’t mind me! It’s actually quite cozy once you get used to it.” Rinia’s head popped out of the hut’s sheet door.

“Can I see inside too?” Tess had Sylvie wrapped in her arms as she curiously eyed the interior of the hut.

“Of course! Everyone, come inside.” Rinia waved us in.

We all looked at each other in doubt, but Virion just herded us all in while saying, “Come now, the place isn’t going to eat you up. It’s quite roomy inside, despite its appearance. Let’s get something to drink! I’m quite famished.”

Once we settled down into the minimally designed disaster shelter that was Rinia’s new home, I sunk into the couch. Leaning my head on my hand, I must’ve nodded off because when I woke up, everyone was also asleep.

Rubbing my eyes, I got up to see that Rinia was the only one still awake, sipping on something that smelled like an herb tonic.

“They won’t be awake for a while, Arthur. Let’s have a talk,” Rinia said simply without even looking at me. She gestured for me to sit in the chair across from her as she continued sipping on her tea.

“Well, from how you probably drugged everyone but me, I’m guessing this is something that only I can know?” My eyes narrowed, but I trusted Rinia. Besides, if

she wanted to kill us, I'm sure with her powers of foresight, she already could've done so.

Wordlessly, I sat down and leaned back, waiting for the aged elf to speak.

"Despite the unforeseen circumstances, you're quite composed, Arthur." Rinia's tone seemed to say she expected this.

"I'm sure if you wanted the worse to happen, it would've happened already," I shrugged.

"Mm."

"..."

"Now where do I begin?" she sighed.

"A logical assumption," nodded Rinia. "Well, let's begin with a small lesson on my powers as a Diviner."

My ears perked up at this. Learning about a rare deviant form of magic didn't come by often, as textbooks only held a limited amount of information about them.

Noticing the interest on my face, Rinia continued. "As you may know, unlike regular mages who draw forth power from the mana particles in the atmosphere, deviants have to find their own source of power to fuel their magic."

I nodded in agreement.

"For example, your mother, an Emitter, has the ability to heal herself and others in a way elemental recovery spells can't compare to."

I nodded to this as well. There were various recovery spells that could be learned by water, wind, and plant attribute mages. Unfortunately, fire and earth didn't have any innate healing attributes, so it was impossible to create a recovery spell out of them. All in all, though, the recovery spells were still weak and couldn't compare to the healing that Emitters were capable of.

"Emitters have mana cores that naturally accumulate a special type of mana that is used to power their spells. Throughout my life, I've met quite a few deviants, each with

unique properties in their magic. They all have one thing in common though; different from an elemental deviant such as yourself, each of the deviants have their own pool of mana that they use to power their deviant magic.” She looked a little absent-minded as she said this.

“It must be an inconvenience for them since they can’t draw in mana from the atmosphere,” I added.

“It sure was. After interviewing many deviants, they would all tell me how difficult it was to learn even basic elemental spells since they did not have mana cores that could harness the mana particles in the atmosphere. However, with their deviant powers, it made up for this handicap.”

There was a moment of silence where I could only hear the soft snoring of Sylvie in Tess’ arms before Rinia spoke again.

“As for Diviners, it’s quite different. First of all, our powers can awaken at any point in our lives, which is quite different from conventional mages and other deviants. Our powers mostly come in erratic bursts where, quite often, blurred images and clips of the future simply flash through my mind; sometimes they’d be useful, most of the time, they were too vague and minute to make anything out of. These little flashes of the future don’t expend any mana at all, actually.”

“...” I stayed silent, an eerie feeling creeping up on me.

“If you were to sense my mana core, I actually have quite a normal mana core, capable of harnessing and refining the mana particles in the atmosphere, which is why I’m quite adept at water attribute magic myself,” Rinia exclaimed mockingly.

“Doesn’t seem like a very useful power if I can’t control it, now does it?” She continued.

“Then what about the spell that you used to allow me to locate my parents and even speak to them when I was little?” I questioned.

“Ah, that’s a nifty little spell I made that involves my unique powers as a Diviner, but not really. You see, Arthur, true divination is reading the future; knowing when and where something is going to happen.”

I was getting lost. “Then if that is your true powers as a Diviner and you said your mana core doesn’t power that magic, how do you—”

“With my own lifespan,” she cursed.

“We Diviners shorten our own lifespans each time we choose to consciously look into the future. That is the true power of a Diviner. Everything else is just a useful little spell that can’t be considered anything more than hat tricks.”

I sat there, wide-eyed, not knowing how to respond.

“What we talked about earlier, Virion’s only love and wife, was another rare Diviner that was much more powerful than I was. Her unconscious divinations and prophecies would be much longer, much more detailed than mine, and much more frequent at that.” Rinia’s reminiscent smile faded as she continued speaking.

“Coupled with her physical beauty and graceful temperament, she was the envy of every female elf of our generation. She was the pride of our kingdom and an idol to the citizens.

“Things were looking perfect as she fell in love with Virion and the two got married in a beautiful ceremony. However, Fate wasn’t as kind to her as everyone thought.”

I couldn’t help but grimace at the tone of this tragedy-in-happening.

“At this time, the war between the Kingdom of Sapin and Elenoir had begun to die down, with the talk of a treaty in the air. However, the King of Sapin at the time made a last ditch effort to do as much damage to our kingdom as possible before the signing of the treaty. He carried out a plan to extinguish the future heir to the throne.”

“You mean...”

“Yes, Virion was the sole target of an assassination mission carried out by the King himself,” Rinia spoke in almost a whisper.

“...”

“Mockingly, his wife was repeatedly tormented by visions of Virion’s death. Her unconscious prophecies told her little of how Virion would die and every time she did something to try and change the future, the outcome only led to a different cause of death. Virion knew the toll of his wife using her powers, but she did so anyway behind his back, out of desperation to keep him from his inevitable death.”

“Every time I use my powers to look into the future, I can feel the days, weeks, sometimes even months being drained out of my body. I could only imagine how terrible it must’ve been for her to repeatedly use this cursed power for the one she loved.”

I didn’t know what to say, and even if I did, it would have been insensitive to say, coming from someone who didn’t know what it felt like.

Rinia’s eyes glistened from the tears that she had been holding back.

“In the end, she was able to keep Virion alive long enough for the peace treaty to be signed, but having burned up so much of her lifespan to protect the man she loved, she died a few months after in his arms with her youthful beautiful appearance replaced with an aged, sickly elder.”

“Do you know who that Diviner was, Arthur?” She looked up with a stream of tears rolling down her right cheek.

“She was my sister.”

Chapter 90

The Start

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

Her words rang out in my ear like a giant gong that was rung at the beginning of every year. They say the people with the widest smiles hide the most pain in their hearts. I shifted my gaze over to the sleeping Virion and remembered the times that he joked around with his cheeky grin.

I had no idea the pain that he had gone through...

I felt like some pubescent teenager that thought the world hated him. I was ignorant of the fact that there were others who might've suffered from deeper pains than I had.

No words left my mouth after what Rinia said, only focusing on the ever so slight tremble of my fingers.

"The reason I bring this up isn't to elicit pity or sorrow from you. I tell you this so that you'll realize the gravity of what I'm about to inform you of next." There was a stern conviction in her voice that made me look back up.

Elder Rinia paused, as if readying her heart before she spoke. "I used my powers to intentionally look into your future, Arthur."

After all she just told me, what she just said weighed on me all the more. "What? Why-why?" was all I could stammer out before Sylvie sleepily walked towards me and hopped onto my lap, falling asleep again, leaving the both of us with a brow raised.

"Seems like your bond is immune to the herbs I gave her," she chuckled.

"Yeah, she probably just fell asleep naturally," I replied with a half grin.

"Well, continuing on, even before the day I first met you when you were a child, I had been getting glimpses of your future; never enough to make sense of it, but it was odd to have so many visions of a specific person. It has never happened before." Rinia

shifted in her seat.

“As you may already be aware, Arthur, things are changing on this continent. Dicathen is going through a new era. We’ve already experienced the beginning of it with the unity of the three Kingdoms and the unveiling of the Six Lances, but that’s just the beginning. Through all of these changes that are going to happen, you always seem to be in the center of them somehow, Arthur.” The elderly Diviner locked eyes with mine.

“Then moving to this remote hideout...” I started to say.

She just gave me a slight nod. “With the knowledge I gained from looking into the future... your future, it seems like I’ve made some enemies.”

“What exactly is it that you learned from looking into my future?” I asked.

“Here’s the tricky part. Telling you too much of what I saw can affect even the outcomes you want. On the other hand, telling you too little defeats the point of me looking into the future in order to find a better outcome,” she sighed.

“How do you feel though, Rinia? You just gave up some of your life in order to see my future... are you okay?” I couldn’t help but frown.

“I’ll be fine. I’ve lived long enough, anyway. I might as well use some of it to help the future.” Rinia waved her hand dismissively.

“I hate sounding like some old fortune teller warning the hero to be careful and other sorts of generic advice that he can pick up from anyone, but it pains me to say that I can only do that much.” I could tell she was trying to make light of the situation to ease my guilt.

“Arthur...” Rinia’s tone became serious, almost foreboding, “You will face many hardships. Whichever future you decide, that will remain constant. You will have enemies and you will have obstructions in your path, but through all of that, what I can leave you with that you need to have an anchor, an end goal. What is it you want to accomplish in your life? That will be what determines your path.”

This sounded more like a motivational speech than a prophecy, but as if she had read my mind, Rinia continued.

“Be grounded, Arthur and I’ll leave you with these two things. One, people do bad

things for good reasons, so don't just take them for what they do on the surface and keep your mind sharp. Two, oftentimes, the scariest enemy isn't the one on the throne, leading the forces, but the abandoned soldier that has nothing to lose; for that, stay wary and don't be overconfident." Rinia's voice became a soft whisper as she warned me, leaving an uncomfortable silence in the room.

"I'm sorry I can't say anything more, but all I can say is to follow and trust your instincts. You are a particularly sharp fellow and I know you'll make the right choices, but sometimes, the right choice isn't always the best choice."



The talk with Rinia ended, leaving me with a rather bad taste in my mouth, like one would get after taking a spoonful of a bitter tonic. Helpful and necessary, but bitter nonetheless.

Rinia woke everyone up soon after, with me pretending to have been asleep with them as well. Rinia made some excuse that she accidentally mixed in some herbs for relaxation that was a lot stronger than she anticipated. No one seemed to mind and we continued on with a light lunch that Rinia prepared out of edible plants and mushrooms. It tasted good despite the lack of meat, but by Sylvie's reaction, I'm sure she would disagree.

It was pretty late in the afternoon by the time we finished eating and had to get on our way. A bigger surprise than the fact that Rinia's home was in the center of a mountainside cliff, was the fact that, through a secret door and passage, she had her own teleportation gate.

Since teleportation gates were made in ancient times, supposedly with the help of the deities, or Asuras, as I now know, it wasn't possible to make any more. Virion wasn't as surprised as everyone else, including me, but knowing Rinia's powers, I could only shrug and realize that this was something within her abilities.

After saying our goodbyes, Tess and I, along with Sylvie, went through the gate. Along with the dizzy feeling I was left with after crossing, we were welcomed back to the edge of Xyrus City by guards that had their spears pointed at us.

After realizing that the unknown crossers were teens and had the Xyrus Academy uniform on, they quickly lowered their weapons.

“We apologize, the portal you were coming from was read as an unknown gate, so we didn’t know who or what would pop out from the other side. It’s rare, but there have been times when mana beasts accidentally stumble through a teleportation gate somewhere deep in the Beast Glades,” one of the guards, that seemed to be the leader, said, although his eyes still watched us with a studying gaze.

“It’s fine. We came from one of the other cities of Elenoir and the guard did mention that he was having troubles with the gate from time to time,” I shrugged.

With an understanding nod, the guards let us go and since there were no carriage waiting for us, the three of us walked to the nearest stop and found a carriage to take us. The sun was already setting and I could see the color distortion in the sky as the Aurora Constellate was soon coming to its peak. It was a lot easier to see it from the floating city than through the dense trees in Elenoir.

“Wow, the Aurora Constellate really is beautiful every time you see it,” Tess said in awe.

“Kyu~” “The sky is colorful!” Sylvie also sat at the edge of the carriage, her small head gazed up in appreciation.

When we made it back to the Helstea Manor, Sylvie scurried up the stairs leading to the door and scratched at it. As Tess and I followed her up, the door opened, revealing a person that I didn’t expect to see.

“Jasmine?!” I stopped where I stood and gasped.

“Long time no see,” my mentor from my adventurer days replied, with the only visible sign on her expressionless face that she was happy to see me, the slight grin she had.

Before I had the chance to say anything more, the rest of the Twin Horns came, one by one, each with a big grin on their faces as they saw me with a girl they’d never seen before.

“You’ve grown,” Durden said with a warm smile on his wide, tanned face.

“Look who we have here! Mr. Hotshot bringing home a lady,” Adam Krensh, the wild-looking vagabond spear user cooed, leaning on the edge of the doorframe.

“Wow, look who’s become more of a man.” Helen Shard, the archer, still as charismatic as before, winked at me.

While they all stayed at the top of the stairs, waiting for us to come up, Angela hopped down the stairs herself and picked me up in a bear hug.

“Look how cute you’ve gotten!!” She squealed as she waved me around, my legs dragging helplessly on the cement stairs since she was too short to completely pick me up off the ground.

“Mmmfph mmmh!” Any hopes to articulate words failed as the abyss of her well-endowed bosom absorbed my face.

“I-I think you should let go...” I heard Tess stammer out as she tugged on the side of my uniform.

“Look who we have here! Aren’t you the cutest little elf!” Angela Rose put me down like discarded waste and picked up Tess, who let out a squeal in surprise.

My family soon came out and greeted us with open arms, with my sister, Eleanor, already having Sylvie in her arms.

I was eager to catch up with the Twin Horns over dinner since I haven’t seen them in over a year, but I could tell Tess was kind of uncomfortable with all of this. She already felt a bit out of place being in my home, but with the unexpected guests that she’d never seen before, she was feeling all the more tense and awkward.

My mother and sister tried to make her feel more comfortable, but since she was being awkward with me as well for some reason, she couldn’t take it.

“Are you really going back to the academy?” I asked.

Tess had just told everyone after apologizing that she had to go back to school first for some Student Council work that she was sorely behind on.

“I’ve missed too much school and work has probably piled up by now. Thank you guys for your hospitality and I’m sorry I couldn’t stay longer.” Tess made a curt bow and followed after the driver that came to get her.

I went outside with her, uncertain if I should go with her or not.

“Don’t worry about me! I’ll admit it was a bit uncomfortable for me in there, but that’s not the main reason I’m going back. I really am behind on Student Council work and I

feel bad since even Lilia is still at school. It wouldn't be right of me to be in her home relaxing while she's working, right?" Tess gave me a reassuring smile.

"You're right, but I'm just worried since Gramps said that you still had to rest. Your mana core still is a bit unstable, even with the seal that Rinia gave you before we left. I just feel more comfortable if I was near you in case something happened." I scratched my head, a rather doubtful feeling itching up on me.

"I have no reason to use magic at the academy for the time being anyways. Besides, you're coming back to school tomorrow. I think I'll be able to survive until then," she gave me a playful wink, distilling the previous awkwardness she had.

"Alright, but be careful." I lightly bonked her head, getting a light punch on the stomach in reply.

TESSIA ERALITH'S POV:

"Whew." It was getting harder and harder to keep a straight face in front of Arthur. If I stayed and talked to him any longer, I felt like my face was going to burn like a candle.

My body felt out of sync because of my mana core; It affected my body, as if somebody tilted the world just slightly enough to throw me off balance, but I didn't tell Arthur this since he'd just get overly worry.

After closing my eyes for what seemed like a couple of seconds, I was already close to the school gate.

"Thank you!" I said to the driver.

He gave me a friendly nod in reply, tipping his hat, before driving back toward Lilia's house.

Right after stepping through the barrier and entering the gate, the atmosphere seemed to have changed drastically. My body tensed immediately, as if signaling my brain that there was danger nearby.

"Hoho! You're here... ALONE? Pfft! This is going to be easier than I thought! Yes it is!"

The throaty voice surprised me. I immediately whipped my head toward the source of the voice.

“Lucas? Lucas Wykes?” I gaped.

It surely was Lucas, but something was off... well a lot of him was off. His skin was gray, first off, and the way his body spasmed randomly made him look more like a rabid monster than a student.

I wanted to move, but I couldn't. The pressure and bloodlust he was giving off didn't allow me too. All my body could do in response was shiver.

“Hehe... I can't believe you're here alone, no I can't! It's nice seeing you again, Princess! As beautiful as ever, yes you are!” Lucas approached me with jagged steps.

This wasn't Lucas anymore... The feeling I got from him was more of a deranged mana beast than from his usual egotistical self.

Seeing the expression on my face, his face tilted as he revealed a toothy grin. “Why don't you play with me until Arthur gets here?”

Chapter 91

Collapse of Xyrus

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

Tess leaving for school left me with a rather uneasy feeling, but, needless to say, we still enjoyed the night. The Helstea Manor was in a festive mood, with barrels of liquor brought up from the cellar by Vincent himself. Lilia's father was getting the most enjoyment out of this, along with my father, who were both in an inebriated state before I even got home. It turns out that the Twin Horns made a detour on their series of expeditions in the Beast Glades to visit us during the Aurora Constellate. It meant a lot to my parents just being able to see their old comrades again and share a drink or two as a toast to old times and embarrassing memories.

After my father and Vincent, Adam Krensh was the next to become intoxicated, his flushed cheeks almost matching his fiery red hair. It was rather fascinating witnessing everyone's alcohol-induced habits since my mother and Tabitha wouldn't allow me to drink alongside them. Adam was your typical loud and rowdy drunk, seeming to lose enough coordination for an infant to be able to wrestle him to the ground and win.

Angela Rose seemed to lose all sense of personal space as she began conversing with me with her cheeks stuck to mine. It didn't help that every spoken word was accompanied by two or three hiccups, making it almost impossible to decipher what she was trying to say. Tabitha ended up having to peel her off of me and 'kindly' escort the coquettish mage up the stairs by the back of her collar.

I had a hard time containing my laughter while Durden Walker soon became drunk as well. What surprised me the most was when he opened his eyes. The usual narrow shape that looked more like a slit became a stern mono-lidded dictator's surprised expression. It didn't help that his eyebrows that were normally slanted down were furrowed into an upward tilt, making his overall expression a mixture of intense focus and uncontrollable surprise. He would take on this gruff commanding tone when speaking, and for the past hour or so before passing out, he was spouting out training drills to one of the empty barrels of beer while participating in the exercises himself.

I couldn't tell whether my former guardian, Jasmine Flamesworth, was drunk or not until she came up, eyes glossy and unfocused, and started repeating to me how much she thought of me and how worried she was as to whether or not I was adjusting to school well. Eventually, everyone retired to their respective rooms. Mother towed my father, who was cradling a bottle of what smelled like whiskey as if it were a newborn, back into their room. Tabitha doing the same for her husband as well. My sister went to sleep with Sylvie quite a while ago in her room, leaving only the leader of the Twin Horns, Helen Shard, and me in the war zone that was once a dining room.

"Quite the party, isn't it? I'm sure this wasn't exactly how you pictured your reunion with us to go," Helen let out a contained giggle.

I laughed in response. "With everything that's been going on these days, it was nice seeing everyone let loose."

"Your parents told us briefly about everything that has happened to you since we were gone. You seem to be doing a fairly good job of taking on your father's role in worrying your mother." The faint smirk that curled on Helen's lips told me she was reminiscing of the past.

"It seems to be the one skill that I seem to be getting better at without even trying."

"If only it were like that for me with mana manipulation," Helen sighed, making us both laugh.

We moved to the living room after the maids started showing up and cleaning the dining room. There, we sat with only a coffee table separating us as we continued talking and catching each other up on what had happened in our respective lives.

It was the first time I'd talked to Helen for this long, but it was comfortable, and she talked to me in a demeanor as if she were talking to an adult, not someone who had barely hit his or her teens. She had an eloquent way of talking that wasn't usual for an Adventurer; she seemed more suited to leading strategic meetings, not being on the front lines, fighting.

"If you don't mind me asking, Arthur, what level is your mana core? I can't seem to even sense your level anymore." Helen lifted her feet from the coffee table and leaned forward as she asked this.

"Solid Yellow," I answered simply. I didn't want to sugarcoat or try to downplay my

level.

“I see. Congratulations, sincerely.” Helen had a mixed expression on her face, one where she was trying to hide her disappointment, but failed. She wasn’t disappointed in me, but herself because even though she more than double my age, I had surpassed her by quite a bit.

“It seems like you are made for bigger and greater things, Arthur. With the discovery of a new Continent and all, I suspect that this small Academy will only be able to hold you down for so long. We should get some rest.” She gave me a smile that didn’t reach her eyes and left after giving me a firm pat on the shoulders.

Collapsing on my bed without the energy or will to even wash, I laid there, thinking about everything that had happened in my life. Was it just a coincidence that I was sent, or actually born into this world as it was going through this so much change?

Was I really some cliché protagonist from a bedtime fairy tale that they always read to us at the orphanage? I couldn’t help but scoff at the thought of being some bored god’s source of entertainment as he toyed with my life in the name of me being ‘The Chosen One’.

Was I in the hands of some god as a chess piece to make the run world as he saw fit? I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping that would help me get rid of these thoughts. The thought of my fate being under someone else’s control didn’t sit right with me. Turning to my side, I chose to dust these fears away... life was already so unexpected, why make it more complicated?

ELIJAH KNIGHT’S POV:

“GET DOWN!” I roared as I conjured an earthen wall between the mana beasts and the other students behind me.

“ATTENTION RENOWNED STUDENTS OF XYRUS ACADEMY!” A rather high-pitched grating voice echoed throughout the campus. *“AS YOU MAY ALL BE AWARE, YOUR INSTITUTION IS CURRENTLY UNDER ATTACK BY MY LITTLE PETS. NO NEED TO FEAR FOR I AM BOTH JUST AND MERCIFUL!”* The voice seemed to taunt us as he said this because there was a dwarven student in the jaws of a discolored black-fanged wolf, a B class mana beast.

Even as I conjured up a rock spear underneath the belly of the black-fanged wolf, it still had the time to take the student's life before collapsing. Gnashing my teeth, I looked away from the dimming gaze of the dwarf that was pleading with his eyes before passing away. If I didn't have experience as an Adventurer, I would've thrown up as the student's insides spilled from the fatal wound caused by the mana beast.

Instead, I calmed myself using a brief meditation technique that I had learned from class that steadied the flow of my mana core before scouting for any other students to save.

"HUMAN STUDENTS, AS LONG AS YOU RAISE BOTH YOUR HANDS AND SWEAR YOUR ALLEGIANCE WITH ME, THE MANA BEASTS WILL NOT ATTACK YOU! ELVES AND DWARVES, DO NOT STRUGGLE AND ALLOW MY PETS TO DESTROY YOUR MANA CORE AND YOU ARE FREE TO LEAVE~ KEKEKEKE!!!" The voice's deranged laugh sent a shiver down my spine. It was enjoying the carnage that was going on in this school that had been so peaceful just hours before.

Although the radical group had been escalating their terroristic activity, this was on a completely different level. It happened so suddenly that there was no way to prepare for an event like this. As far as I could tell, though, at this point was that this stage of their plan was meticulously executed. There were no places to escape to and no way to call for help.

The once clear barrier formation that kept any intruders, including mana beasts, from entering the campus, had already turned into a translucent red cage, making the sky look like it was dipped in blood, keeping anyone or anything from leaving.

I didn't know who the voice belonged to, but its motives were clear. He was willing to take human captives, but wanted all nonhuman mages either dead or incapacitated. I could see pillars of smoke from different buildings of the academy where fights were happening. From time to time, I locked eyes with some of the Disciplinary Committee members as they were fighting off several mana beasts, acknowledging each other since we had no time to brief each other on the situation elsewhere.

There were obviously traitors in the academy, because some of the professors were now being held off by other professors while cloaked figures, as well as the mana beasts, were taking care of the students.

It was strange; I've seen some of the mana beasts while I was an Adventurer, but the

only thing different about them was the coloration, or lack of color to be more exact. Except for their matching red eyes, all of the mana beasts that flooded Xyrus Academy looked like they had their colors drained, as they were just different hues of gray.

I couldn't tell how many hours had passed since the invasion started, but there were no signs of help arriving for some reason, like we were closed off from the rest of Xyrus.

I trudged on through the campus quad where bodies laid limp and pools of blood formed around them. This academy was supposed to be the safe haven for future mages of this continent. It pissed me off more than anything that there weren't proper measures implemented for this type of scenario. Since the unification of the three Kingdoms, did The Council not think that there would be enemies?

Just as I was about to follow after a cloaked figure into one of the Alchemy labs, a throaty growl caught my attention enough to avoid a thorned growler's jaw. Unfortunately, I couldn't avoid its pounce and was hammered into the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of me.

"Grrrrrr," as the giant, furry lizard-shaped mana beast's saliva was drenching my uniform, its red eyes were staring at me, as if waiting for me to do something.

"Screw off!" I grunted as I simultaneously conjured a pillar from the ground, launching the two-meter long mana beast in the air before it flipped agilely to regain its ground.

Before I had the chance to do anything more, a sword flew down from the sky, skewering the thorned growler's head to the ground. The mana beast squirmed helplessly for a couple of seconds before its body also sank to the ground lifelessly.

"Thanks," I grunted, too tired for pleasant formalities. It was Curtis Glayder who came down from the top of a nearby statue to retrieve his weapon. His bond, a world lion, following briskly behind him.

"No problem. You should get somewhere safe until we get reinforcements; it's too dangerous out here in the open," he said, nodding back.

"I'll be fine. There are too many enemies for you guys to handle while I hide. I can still help." I bandaged my bleeding arm that had been cut open just now with a torn sleeve and turned my back to follow after the cloaked figure.

Suddenly, a sound that could only have been amplified with mana boomed like thunder. I couldn't even hear myself scream in pain as both Curtis and I reeled in pain. The ear-numbing ring from the watchtower's bell didn't reverberate in my chest. I felt it in my feet as the whole earth shook from it.

Chapter 92

Bird's Cage

ELIJAH KNIGHT'S POV:

As the earsplitting sound of the bell tower faded into a dull ring, the owner of the same grating voice, that was most likely the cause of all this, cleared his throat before speaking.

"AHM! TESTING... AH AH... PERFECT!" The sound was coming from the bell tower near the center of campus. *"STUDENTS AND FACULTY MEMBERS OF XYRUS ACADEMY. I WOULD LIKE TO WELCOME ALL OF YOU TO JOIN US FOR THE FINAL CEREMONY. I ADVISE EVERY ONE OF YOU TO MAKE YOUR WAY TOWARDS THE BELL TOWER, AS THIS IS SOMETHING YOU GUYS WOULDN'T WANT TO MISS! DON'T WORRY, MY LITTLE PETS WON'T BITE ANYMORE~ I PROMISE."*

With a quick glance and nod at each other, Curtis and I immediately headed towards the bell tower. "Get on, quick!" Curtis beckoned with his left arm stretched out as he rode atop his world lion, Grawder.

Grawder let out a dissatisfied grunt, but otherwise kept to himself as I hopped onto its back behind Curtis, using this time to circulate mana towards my injuries in hopes of easing some of the injuries.

As we got closer to the bell tower, I could see flashes of spells go off in the vicinity. "What do you think is going on?" Curtis asked. I couldn't see his face, but from just his voice I could imagine the sort of anxious expression he had on his frustratingly handsome face.

"Some of the students and professors are firing spells at the bell tower," I commented the obvious, not knowing what else to say.

"It looks like there's some sort of barrier surrounding the bell tower," Curtis pointed out as a translucent wall flickered after receiving a spell cast by a professor.

It wasn't long until we came into full view of what was happening as the 'main event'.

There was a large stone platform that hadn't been there before; most likely erected by magic. The once flawless marble floor around the bell tower, which marked the center of the academy, was cracked and splintered with pools of wet crimson blood. Various species of discolored mana beasts had gathered around the platform, waiting patiently, almost robotically, ignoring the frightened students just outside the barrier.

[Earthen Javelin Barrage]

[Supernova]

[Thunder Spear]

[Windblade Twister]

After a jumbled drone of chanting, several high-leveled spells were cast in the direction of the bell tower, but despite the huge manifestations of elements bombarded onto a single point, the mana shield that closed off the bell tower only fizzed harmlessly before eating up all of the spells. Seeing that leaves of the trees on the inside of the barrier had not the slightest rustle proved how impenetrable this barrier was.

There was a large crowd of both students and faculty members in front of the bell tower, who were both injured and scared; unsure of what to do as the professors made fruitless attempts at breaking through the protective field.

"Stay here while I try to find the rest of the DC members," Curtis instructed before dropping me off near the front of the barrier. Before I could say anything, Grawder raced off with his master riding on its back, leaving me anxiously waiting for something to happen.

The crowd of disheveled students were all anxiously chatting with their friends and peers about the disaster that fell upon them today. Some were crying, while other red-eyed students had already passed that phase and were waiting with hardened expressions. I could only wait as well. With the cage keeping us from leaving the academy grounds and mana beasts that seemed ready to jump and devour any who disobeyed, I could see the hope in their eyes flickering away. We were prisoners of this massacre awaiting our sentence.

Although most of the students in the crowd seemed only lightly injured and battered—indicating that they caved in rather quickly—there were a few fighters

whose injuries were more serious. Fortunately, some of the professors were adept in the field of healing. While they couldn't compare to Emitters, they were able to save a few lives today.

"WELL IT SEEMS THAT EVERYONE ALIVE HAS MADE IT TO THE GRAND FINALE OF TODAY'S SHOW! I THANK YOU ALL FOR COMING!" The high-pitched tenor had a piercing quality that made everyone turn their attention back towards the bell tower.

He appeared... as if manifesting out of the shadows. The source of the jarring voice that sounded like rusted nails scraping against a chalkboard. He wore a gaudy red robe, decorated with an unreasonable amount of jewelry, reminding me of some second son of a king; a figure who was so down the line of power that his only defining aspect was his inherited wealth. The man wore a rather creepy mask that didn't match his attire. It was a simple white mask with two slits for his eyes, and a crudely drawn jagged smile the color of blood. Behind his mask was a head of crimson hair that flowed past his shoulder blades.

While he had his hands behind his back, it looked like he was holding something, but I couldn't make out what it was because of his shadow.

At the sight of the bold figure, the murmuring of everyone ceased, creating a rather eerie atmosphere. A deafening silence descended upon the crowd as all eyes fell on the mysterious masked man, depicting both curiosity and fear of what he would do next.

Drip. Drip. Drip. The sound of small droplets splashing on the ground echoed through the entire space, further adding to the uneasy suspense.

All of a sudden, an earthen spear barreled directly at the masked culprit, unfortunately its trajectory ended as it smashed into the protective shield, shattering into pieces.

Unfazed, he stood there as students began chanting in desperate hopes that *somehow*, the barrier had weakened enough for us to break through.

There were strings of curses shouted out at the masked figure as everyone realized that it was impossible to break through. I heard familiar voices cry out insults and profanities as they didn't know what else to do at this point.

"Pfft..." The man's shoulder bobbed up and down as he tried to contain his laughter.

“PUAHAAAAAAAAHA!” His manic laughter, unaided by mana, echoed throughout the area, somehow drowning out everyone else’s voices.

I could see a mixture of emotions in the students’ and professors’ faces: Fear, anger, desperation, confusion, frustration, and helplessness as they were all stunned into silence by the abrupt laughter.

It was then that the masked man tossed the object he was holding behind his back onto the floor.

With a dull thud, the spherical object rolled into view close enough for the people in the front to see.

It was a hea...

It was a real head.

It wasn’t the sound of water dripping that I heard, it was blood from the head.

It took my mind a couple of seconds of blank staring to process what was going on before a wave of nausea hit me like a bat.

I threw up.

Over and over again.

The stench of last night’s dinner mixed with an acidic twist made me gag more until I was left with only dry heaves and watery eyes.

By the time I composed myself, I could see students and professors alike either looking away, pale-faced, or clutching their stomachs as they continued vomiting on the ground.

I didn’t want to look again, but my eyes were itching to look back at the decapitated head. When I saw it again, I noticed it was a dwarf’s. I’d seen her before, but hair covered some of her face as a pool of blood expanded from underneath with only the bone of her spine jutting out... it was so white.

I was drawn to the gore. My mind was screaming to turn away, but my eyes stayed fixated on the gruesome sight as everything else blurred out of focus.

As his disturbing laughter continued, his whole body shaking in delight, a booming howl caught everyone's attention.

"NOOOOOOOO! DORADREA!" I spotted Theodore as he roared, charging furiously towards the masked man. He knocked aside the students that weren't quick enough to get out of his one man stampede.

"DORADREA!" Theodore screamed, his voice cracking as he hammered his fists against the translucent barrier.

There were only two sounds that could be heard. It was the sound of delighted laughter coming from the masked man, and the sound of Theodore's thunderous pounding against the barrier.

BOOM!

It was one of the Disciplinary Committee members...

BOOM!

The same group Arthur was in...

BOOM!

A crater was formed underneath Theodore as the marble floor around him continued to crumble and cave under the pressure of his might. As he continued smashing against the barrier, blood began streaming down his arms as his hands were shattered by his own strength. Despite that, the fury never left Theodore's eyes as his icy gaze never left the masked man.

"COME OUT HERE AND FIGHT ME, YOU COWARD!" Theodore howled, a deranged look shrouding his eyes.

Suddenly, the masked man stopped his laughter and he removed his mask. His face was narrow and sharp, with skin that glowed in a hue of gray. In spite of the sharp and the attractive features he boasted, it was hard to miss the crazy, almost psychotic expression that seems to have been permanently ingrained into his being. His face was wrinkled in a scowl as he tilted his head to the side, as if he was confused by Theodore's last statement.

“Coward? Me?” The masked figure began walking towards Theodore with the easy arrogance of someone who knew that everything in the world existed for his taking, every one of his steps seeming to drive a nail into the minds of everyone present.

“Yes, you! Stop hiding behind this barrier and fight me!” He growled back, blood continuing to drip from his broken hands.

“Coward? Me? The mighty and reborn Draneeve... hiding?” The person called Draneeve blinked out of view and appeared in front of Theodore with a speed so fast, Theodore wasn’t even able to react as Draneeve pulled him to the other side of the barrier. He threw the Disciplinary Committee member easily onto the erected platform.

Caught off guard, Theodore landed less than elegantly on his back before squirming to his knees as he had trouble putting weight on his crippled hands.

Again, Draneeve blinked in a sudden flash of speed and squatted down facing Theodore. *“Why don’t you fight me now?”* A sinister smirk curved on the red-haired man’s face.

With a desperate yell, Theodore jumped up, bringing his leg down, executing a heel kick towards Draneeve’s shoulder.

BOOM!

As the platform splintered and a cloud of dust formed, it was obvious that Theodore imbued enough mana into his leg to crumble a building.

There were a few cheers from the students as we all waited for the cloud to clear. I too hoped that the attack was enough to warrant cheering, but I knew it wouldn’t be that easy.

A howl of pain amidst the cloud of debris rendered the cheers moot as we waited with bated breath. As the dust cleared, none of us were prepared for what we saw.

It wasn’t a secret to everyone here that Theodore was a deviant, capable of using mana to manipulate gravity. Just from the fact that the stone platform shattered like glass, we knew that Theodore hadn’t held back during his attack just then, but what we did not expect was for Theodore’s leg to still be positioned atop Draneeve’s shoulder where it landed... except... Draneeve was fine while Theodore’s leg had been snapped

cleanly in half.

We all stood there with our mouths agape. Even the professors were baffled by the clear difference in strength between the two. Theodore's attack would've even made the professors do everything that they could to dodge the attack, yet this mysterious man here had taken it head on and come out unscathed despite the freshly made fissures.

"Come on! The Great Draneeve isn't hiding. Let's fight!" The smirk never left his face as he kicked Theodore away like rag doll.

"I'm fighting you like you wanted, right? What's wrong?" Draneeve tilted his head again in mock confusion as he continued to beat Theodore into a stupor. His face was no longer even recognizable as he was pummeled to a bloody and broken mess. The rest of us couldn't even do anything... only watch as our fellow schoolmate was tortured right in front of our eyes.

".....cker," Theodore managed to croak before vomiting out blood.

"Hmm? What was that?" Draneeve landed another solid kick to his side, a loud crack of a broken bone accompanying it.

Lifting his battered head, Theodore looked straight up into his assailant's eyes with a look of pure hatred and disdain before he spat the blood congealed in his mouth at Draneeve's foot.

I could see veins popping on Draneeve's forehead but he simply took a deep breath as he ran his fingers through his red hair, peering down in disdain at the bloody mess that was Theodore like a squashed insect.

"I see you still have a bit of fight left in you! Hmm... it is too bad though, you seem to be on the verge of dying from blood loss. Let me help you with that."

"GAAAAAAHHHH!" The gurgled scream was all I could hear as Theodore combusted into crimson flames at the snap of Draneeve's fingers. That was all he did... snap his fingers.

He snapped them again, extinguishing the flames, leaving a charred and smoking carcass.

I realized by this time that my hands were covered in warm crimson from my nails digging into the flesh of my palms. I was useless at this point. Even if I ended up succeeding in breaking the barrier, wouldn't I just end up like Theodore?

"Pfft! See! I helped him! He's not bleeding anymore, right? PUAHAHAHAHA!" His cackling laugh filled the area as he began clapping for himself in amusement.

Seeing that none of us laughed along, he just shook his head. *"Oh poo~ you guys are no fun. Relax, I left him alive for now."*

I peeled my eyes away from Theodore's decimated body to see Curtis being held back by the other members of the Disciplinary Committee. His mouth was covered by Claire who had a trail of tears streaming down her anguished face. The princess, Kathlyn, was holding onto her brother's arm with her head down so I couldn't see her expression. I couldn't see that elf, Feyrith, and the member, the mysterious one with the narrow eyes. I think his name was Kai...

"NOW! I apologize to you all for the delay! Without further ado, we will now commence with our main event! Fellas, bring them out!"

As Draneeve grandly waved his arm like some conductor, the frozen mana beasts stirred and sat up straight as a line of hooded figures, covered in robes, came out from the bell tower, each dragging with them a student.

It was when I saw her that my mind came to a stop.

I felt like I was suddenly swimming in thick syrup as my hand pressed hard against the barrier. I fell to my knees and just stared out in front of me, in a daze.

Being dragged by her hair, her face battered and bruised while her clothes torn and messy... was Tessia.

Chapter 93

Chosen Ones

CLAIRE BLADEHEART'S POV:

I held onto Curtis, clasping my hand over his mouth in desperation. My vision blurred as tears continued to well up and stream down my cheeks.

We couldn't... I couldn't do anything.

The Disciplinary Committee members were in charge of preserving the safety and order within Xyrus Academy. I was handpicked by Director Goodsky herself to take on this vital duty, and with the exception of Arthur, I was assigned the task of choosing the members and leading them.

I was their leader, yet I had let all of this happen... I chose to let in a spy.

I was ignorant of the fact that all of our movements were being leaked to the enemy.

I was responsible for the state Theodore was in right now. Even if he made it out of this alive, he would never be able to walk on his own two feet again.

I was responsible for Feyrith getting captured.

I was responsible for the death of Doradrea Oreguard.

...

I should've noticed it by how the radical group seemed to know of our every move and effortlessly slip past us on each occasion. I guess subconsciously, I believed that my team members would, without a doubt, be loyal.

Because of my naive assumptions, we were the first to get attacked. It had happened last night, when the soft, dim light of dawn peeked out of the horizon. We had been busy preparing for the full-scale battle that would come eventually; finalizing the emergency evacuation plan after constructing makeshift safe houses out of basements

and old classrooms for students to barricade themselves in.

We had all agreed that this might be going a bit overboard, but I now realized that it wasn't even close to enough.

Restless, everyone decided to let out some steam by training. It was Kai's idea. He suggested that we enlarge the area of the training barrier so that everyone could practice without the students, who were all on edge from the recent events, being startled by the sounds of spells and weapons colliding.

We had never enlarged the training barrier before, but nevertheless, I didn't find anything wrong with his suggestion, so I let Kai supervise the barrier while the rest of us trained inside it.

When the barrier formed, it took on a reddish sheen that normally never appeared. Thinking back, the training barrier Kai erected by using the artifact was a miniature version of the cage that was now surrounding the entire academy.

That's when we were attacked. Kai had let them in; it was as simple as that. That sly bastard was the one who gave away all of our plans to the radical group while feeding us false information.

Kai had his hands full keeping the barrier up so that no one outside could hear the sounds of battle. We were outnumbered three to one yet, we were on the verge of winning. The radical group mages were strong, but my team members were stronger. We would have broken free and warned the school... but he had to show up.

As soon as he stepped into the barrier, whatever advantage we had had disappeared. I just couldn't believe he'd be a part of this. No, I'm lying. It was definitely possible for him to be a part of this. What I couldn't believe was that it was actually him.

He single-handedly turned the tides. He was a gifted mage before and if it wasn't for his twisted and conceited personality, I would've definitely wanted him to join the Disciplinary Committee. He was talented, but a lot of his breakthroughs came from the overuse of elixirs and other synthetic drugs that would result in dire consequences later. This was the rumor, anyways.

But he was on another level. The mana fluctuation around him was comparable to that of professors'—no, beyond them. It was odd though. The abundant mana particles surrounding him were erratic, chaotic almost; there was so much mana being forcibly

generated that it overflowed. I wasn't sure if that was the cause, but even the color of his skin and hair took on a different tint.

The amount of mana was unnatural for someone barely hitting the age that most humans would begin to awaken. This reminded me of Arthur; he might even be stronger than him presently, however, I knew for certain that whatever led him to this state wasn't anything natural.

Needless to say, we weren't much of a match for him. Chantless casting, multi-casting, an endless well of mana—even if he was alone, I felt like he could've held up against all of us together.

'How was it possible for him to have become this strong?' was the persistent thought that kept running through my mind, poking at me.

"You call yourself a student of this academy? Out of all people, I would've assumed your pride wouldn't allow you to be some dog of a crazy terrorist group, Lucas," I spat out in disdain. "I now see that I was wrong."

I could see that I had hit a nerve as his smug expression darkened, but before he got reckless like I had hoped, Kai intervened.

"Lucas, he wants this done quick and clean. Don't forget the mission," Kai said curtly, his face tensed in concentration from trying to keep the barrier up.

Kai had ignored our repeated hateful shouts prying for the reason of his betrayal, only opening his mouth to keep Lucas in check.

At this point, it would be impossible to get out by trying to beat him; our goal was to create an opening in the barrier.

While battling, we intentionally aimed our spells at the same spot without them noticing, but the barrier was a lot stronger than we had anticipated.

After defeating three of them, Feyrith was the first to get captured and pulled away by the other radical group members, but by then, we had managed to make a crack on the surface of the barrier.

We were able to make a gap in the barrier large enough for us to fit through, but not all of us were able to escape. Through gritted teeth, we had to leave behind Doradrea,

along with Feyrith, who stalled the radical group long enough for us to escape.

It didn't feel like we escaped, no, it felt like we were let go. I could still clearly remember the smirk etched onto his face as he stood there, looking down on me like an insect he released because he didn't want to trouble himself with the mess.

By the time we made it out, it was already too late. Our battle had taken time, and during that time, the academy was already locked in a cage and under attack by both the radical group and mana beasts.

Director Cynthia had not returned and by the time we found some of the Student Council members, they were assaulted as well, although they seemed to be in a better shape than us. Clive seemed especially grateful that the Student Council President was still not back from her trip. The Student Council Secretary—Lilia, I believe—asked me worriedly if Arthur was okay, and was relieved to find out he wasn't inside the academy.

It was demoralizing for us as some of the students we tried so hard to fight for simply gave in and sided with the enemies.

But I couldn't blame them.

It was us that failed in our jobs to protect them

...

"Please, Curtis... please." I continued begging, choking back a sob.

"Please, stop. You can't." I bit my lower lip.

"Please..."

Curtis' thrashing settled, but I could still feel him trembling from rage. I removed my hand from his mouth and noticed that there was blood; it was Curtis'.

He was biting on his lip so hard, he bit into them.

"I'll kill him..." I heard Curtis mutter, his voice shaking.

"Curtis, please... just wait. I can't have you charging out like Theodore. We can't lose

you too.” I tried to keep a firm tone as I spoke, but I didn’t sound convincing even to myself.

“Wait? Are we supposed to just wait while we let him kill Theodore and Feyrith? Huh? Like how he killed Doradrea?” he spat out in a growl, his voice pitched low and quiet.

My chest contracted from the venom in Curtis’ words, but before I could say anything else, a sharp sound stopped me.

Curtis held onto his left cheek, stunned.

Kathlyn’s eyes were red and swollen, her long lashes still wet with tears. Her expression was a knot of grief and frustration. Her usual impassive expression was nowhere to be seen. Her hand was still held up in front of her from where she had just slapped her brother.

The strike wasn’t loud, nor was it that strong, but I could tell by Curtis’ expression that the light slap from his sister struck deeper and harder than any bludgeon could.

“Brother. We need to think of a way save them. We need to make a plan to protect everyone here. We need to stop that monster, but we can’t do any of that if you’re like this... or if you’re dead.” Kathlyn’s gaze was unrelenting, her every word piercing through not just Curtis, but through me as well.

She was right, we needed to get our act together. We needed to think of a plan.

I looked around the crowd in front of the bell tower and behind us, thinking of a way to escape to Director Cynthia’s room to see if there was anything that could help us in there, but robed figures stood guard, while the mana beasts were tensed up and ready to pounce onto anyone that tried to make a run for it.

It was then that they brought the captives out, and it was then, that I saw Feyrith being dragged out, beaten and unconscious.

As everyone stared silently while the row of robed figures, each holding onto their respective prisoner, silently trudged out, it took me a few seconds from this distance to realize that one of them... was the Student Council President.

ELIJAH KNIGHT'S POV:

The scene played out in slow motion for me.

I rubbed my eyes just to be sure, but no matter how many times I rubbed and blinked, her figure wouldn't change. While disheveled and matted with dirt and blood, there was no mistaking that distinct gunmetal hair.

My mind raced as a part of me wrestled to figure out what had happened and how she appeared here while another part of me was still in denial; she wasn't supposed to be here. She was supposed to be with Arthur.

Whispers and mutters began to explode as soon as the students and faculty members alike realized that one of the prisoners was the Student Council President and the other a member of the Disciplinary Committee.

"Shhhhh." Draneeve waved his hand theatrically for us to settle down before continuing. "I'm sure all of you are just dying to know what is going on, but before I explain, I'd like to introduce myself."

He took a few steps forward and straightened his robe, combing his hair back with his fingers. "As I mentioned earlier, I go by Draneeve."

He made a dramatic pause, as if expecting a round of applause. When nothing happened, he just shrugged and continued.

"I know that at this moment, you guys may see me as some sort of bad guy. I wouldn't be surprised, what with the attacks and the deaths, but I assure you, I am on your side."

That ridiculous statement caused an uproar, as jeers and shouts reverberated through the crowd...

"Silence."

His voice couldn't have been louder than a low growl, but the weight of that one word and the immediate pressure following it froze the crowd to a mute.

"As I was saying... My name is Draneeve and I have come to save you all." Draneeve spread his arms in a grandiose manner, his robe fluttering from the wind making him look pretty impressive.

No one said a word, too afraid of what he might do; all of us simply waited for him to continue speaking.

“You see, I come from a faraway land. This faraway land is a cruel, cruel place for the weak. Yes, I am talking about all of you. Those gathered here are considered the ‘elite’, whose backgrounds and potentials make you the future of this continent, but from where I come from, you guys. Are. Simply. Trash.” Draneeve’s last words were spat out in a mocking staccato.

“That being said, I have made this extremely long and tiresome journey to prepare those I deem worthy so that when my lord becomes this continent’s new ruler, you guys will have a place in his kingdom and not be tossed aside like the trash you currently are.”

I glanced back to see everyone just looking around, confused. By the expressions on some of their faces, they looked to be in disbelief. Not just surprised, but they sincerely looked like they thought this whole thing was some big prank.

“To those who stand in front of me today, congratulations on being the ones chosen to be honored pawns of the new ruler of this continent. Lukiyah, step forth and show them a glimpse of the newfound powers you have been bestowed with.”

Lukiyah?

No... It couldn't be...

The figure, concealed under his robe, that had been holding onto Tess by her hair stepped forth, dragging her with him. I bit my lip, struggling to keep calm. Underneath his hood, he seemed to be looking for someone before he stopped; I could feel his eyes on me. I stood transfixed as he removed the hood of his robe.

Confirming my suspicions, it turned out to be Lucas Wykes.

His eyes seemed to be laughing as he continued to stare at me.

Slowly, the edge of his lips curved up as he tugged Tessia up by her hair, just enough so her neck was next to his face.

His mocking gaze never left mine as Lucas ran his tongue slowly... gratingly up her neck to her ear, only to stop and wink at me.

Any sort of inhibition controlling my rage disappeared at that instant, leaving me with just enough sanity to curse out.

“LUCAS, YOU SON OF BITCH! HOW DARE YOU!” My vision reddened as my mind began to numb. Suddenly, as if some inner force pushed my consciousness out, my body felt like it wasn’t mine anymore... like I was an entirely different person simply spectating from a first-person point of view.

‘Kill.’ A voice echoed in my head.

I had never felt a sensation like this before, but I knew that whatever it was that’s controlling my body, knew how to use my powers better than I could myself.

‘Kill.’

It was a peculiar feeling that I knew wasn’t normal. It felt like the monster that I had been trying to keep locked up switched places with me.

My vision distorted and constantly pulsed from what I assumed to be adrenaline. I couldn’t hear anything besides the beating of my heart. My body seemed like a shell controlled like a puppet by someone that wasn’t me.

‘Kill.’ The voice was getting stronger.

What the hell was happening to me?

Black spikes ruptured from the earth around me, hurting some of the students who couldn’t move out of the way fast enough.

I felt the need to at least apologize but my body was fixated on Lucas.

‘Kill, kill, kill!’ My mind felt like it was going to split open from the pain.

I walked rather unsteadily towards the ingrate that couldn’t be described with just profanity. As I approached the barrier, I worried whether or not my body would be able to break through, but it turned out to be an unnecessary concern. Some sort of black plasma suddenly engulfed my hand and as my body laid it against the barrier, the black plasma slowly began to dissolve the barrier as easily as fire melted butter.

I could make out the surprised expression on Lucas’ face, but the expression on

Draneeve's face was far more unexpected. His expression paled, twisting and contorting in a way that I could only make out to be as fear. He held his hands out in a placating manner, as if trying to calm me down. At that moment, the dozens of mana beasts all sprung out to attack me, but it was futile. At the flick of my wrist, the black spikes shot from the ground, skewering the discolored mana beasts mid jump.

Was this me? I had never seen magic like this before. It was unnatural, almost evil in a way. Like it was a power meant solely for killing and destroying.

My body ignored the dead mana beasts and slowly drew nearer towards Lucas, who had now lost his bemused expression, replaced by furrowed brows and a tinge of unease in his eyes. The other robed figures decisively released their grip from their prisoners and was about to collectively rush towards me, but for some reason, Draneeve stopped them. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but Draneeve seemed to be almost pleading as his hands constantly gestured in hopes to calm me down.

Suddenly, a sharp pain that seared into me like a burning blade made my body go rigid. I don't know how I knew this, but it felt like my body was reaching its limits.

No. Not yet. I knew I couldn't control my body, but at this point, I desperately wanted my body to at least to kill Lucas like it had planned to.

My body began staggering, as each step seemed to slowly become more unsteady.

Almost...

My body put up its hand and a black spike shot out towards Lucas. The spike that looked at least arm's length couldn't kill Lucas like I had hoped, but it's speed was fast enough to the point where Lucas couldn't completely dodge the projectile.

Lucas tumbled back from the force of the blow and I could barely make out the black spike sticking out of his right shoulder.

Just one more...

My vision was dimming and my body stilled; I seemed to be losing consciousness. I looked once more at Draneeve, who looked more confused now, and before my consciousness completely faded into the darkness, I thought I saw him. I may have just been hallucinating, but I thought I saw my friend.

I thought I saw Arthur, but that may have just been my wishful thinking.

Chapter 94

Arrival

CLAIRE BLADEHEART'S POV:

Humility. Loyalty. Resoluteness. Courage.

These were the words instilled in me even before I understood what they meant. These were the four qualities that were necessary in order to have a heart as sharp as a sword. This was the creed of the Bladeheart family.

Ignorant as I was as a child, I had truly believed that I would be able to follow this sacred doctrine my family was built upon... no matter what circumstances.

How truly ignorant I was.

This was the thought that clawed at my mind; making my heart ache as I stood helplessly, watching... simply watching.

Simply watching as Theodore was beaten and burned into an unrecognizable state.

Simply watching as Elijah fearlessly tried to defy, despite being unaided, a figure so powerful I could only submit and hope... hope that I'll somehow make it out alive.

Even with my eyes fixed on the scene, I had trouble registering what exactly was occurring, much less believe it to be real.

What all of the student mages here could not hope to do; what all of the professors here failed to accomplish—Elijah, single-handedly, had achieved.

I had never deemed him as anything more than Arthur's silly friend. He had given me the impression of being easy-going, almost ditzy at times, but not at this moment. After he had cursed aloud at Lucas, his demeanor shifted into someone unrecognizable.

As thoughtless and downright mad as he may have been, that ditzy friend displayed

what I couldn't.

As if Elijah's enraged cry had released his soul, Elijah's body seemed almost lifeless as his shoulder's slumped and his head hunched forward. I couldn't help but look away when suddenly a blast of black, metallic spikes shot out of the ground. I thought Arthur's friend had already died, but I realized it wasn't Draneeve or any of his henchmen that invoked the mysterious spell; it was Elijah that casted it.

The spell he had used then was unusual, almost unnatural, but it was when he placed his palm on the surface of the barrier; when a black flame magic began coiling around his hand, melting the transparent barrier like it was butter, that a cold chill ran down my spine.

Seeing that mysterious magic so easily destroy something not even the professors combined could scratch, I felt hope. Maybe he would be able to end this. It was also that, alongside this feeling of hope, I felt an almost tangible contempt for myself.

I looked down to realize my hand had unconsciously gripped the hilt of my sword. I couldn't help but scoff at myself. What use was this sword of mine if fear rendered me unable to even take a step forward.

Looking back up, I fixed my eyes on Elijah. He swayed as he walked, almost staggering like he wasn't really in control of himself. Anyone that tried and oppose him was almost instantly pierced by a black spike. The speed in which each spell was casted shouldn't be possible; it couldn't even be called a spell, but more of an automatic defense mechanism.

I had never heard of something like this before, much less see it with my own eyes—magic that was so unnatural... sinister... evil.

What confused me, and probably everyone else present, was how Draneeve behaved towards Elijah. Elijah was killing his mana beasts left and right; he had already killed three of his robed underlings. He should be angry, downright furious at him for opposing his plans, but instead he looked... afraid.

I was only able to make out parts of what Draneeve was saying to Elijah as he frankly ignored the mastermind of this disaster, making his way towards Lucas.

I heard him several times repeating how he didn't know...

I also thought I heard him refer to Elijah as 'sir'...no that couldn't be right.

After his useless attempts at calming Elijah down, Draneeve started barking out orders to his robed lackeys, telling them to not lay a hand on Elijah. It was a strange sight as our fellow student was trying to kill his allies but the leader was ordering his allies not to fight back.

The other students were baffled at all of this, not quite sure what to make of it; some were voicing their doubts on whether he was actually on our side, perhaps suspecting that Elijah was actually in league with Draneeve. This was until he collapsed on the ground, his final attempt at killing Lucas ultimately unsuccessful.

While at first, we were too shocked by Elijah's sudden outrage and display of cryptic powers, some of the professors composed themselves enough to realize that the fracture in the barrier made by Elijah at least gave us a chance to fight back.

This thought had already crossed my mind. I knew that with all of the mana beasts either dead or badly injured and Draneeve partially occupied with Elijah's body, now was the perfect chance to retaliate.

I knew this, yet my feet stayed nailed to the ground beneath me. I knew this, yet I was still afraid...

"Student's, clear a way!" An arcane professor was leading a small group of professors toward the hole in the barrier. The students absentmindedly shuffled out of the way. While many were too discouraged, the image of Doradrea's decollated head and Theodore's lifeless body burnt in their minds, to want to join them in their crusade, some students still gathered the courage to try and join them.

Clive was one of them. I spotted him rushing towards the professors, his hands already wielding his bow and arrow but the professor in the back stopped him from going with them.

"Fools," I whispered under my breath. It was still hopeless. Did the professors think that they could now somehow beat Draneeve? They should know better than us. Was it their sense of duty that was driving them to their deaths like this? Or was it their pride preventing them from being rational.

Was being courageous akin to dying a fool's death? Is that what the Bladeheart creed wanted from me?

Kathlyn must've heard me. Her red eyes, still quivering, were looking at me, as if I had an answer.

But I didn't. I knew my limits and I knew only a fraction of what my enemies were capable of and even that was enough to rob me of any confidence to unsheathe my sword.

Like an overused story my mother would always read to me before sending me to bed, the professors marched towards the fracture in the barrier like heroes on an expedition to save the princess from the evil magician;

I could see the arcane professor, whose class I took last semester, in the lead. Behind him was the spell formations professor who taught underclassmen. There was one professor that I couldn't recognize following a few steps behind with a crooked wooden staff. Then joined Professor Glory. She caught my eye and gave me a firm, solemn nod before taking out a second sword from her dimension ring.

The look she gave me then sent chills down my spine. It was a look that I had never actually seen before, but one that my instincts knew of; it was a look of someone accepting her death.

The Bladeheart creed clawed its way up into my mind.

Humility. Loyalty. Resoluteness. Courage.

Damn it.

Thinking of this provided me with a mixture of emotions: frustration, for lacking the resolve and loyalty a Bladeheart should display for her academy; shame, for lacking the courage to fight alongside them; and ignorance, for foolishly believing that I had what it took to be a leader of the Disciplinary Committee... to be a Bladeheart.

I shook my head in hopes to clear my dark thoughts.

Living through this will give me another chance to redeem myself, would it not? I can't be courageous, loyal, resolute and humble if I'm dead.

I turned my attention back to Draneeve, who had kneeled next to Elijah. It looked like he was checking for signs, making sure that Elijah was still alive, carefully, almost tenderly like a royal attendant would to his king. Our professors, prized mages

throughout the entire content, were promptly ignored as he barked out further orders to his robed subordinates to prepare something.

Finally, getting up as he carried Elijah's limp body in his arms, Draneeve began walking towards the back of the stone platform where several robed men were fumbling with what looked like an oddly shaped anvil.

"Lukiyah. Change of plans. You will take care of the ones ignorantly approaching and dispose of these—" he glanced down at the students captured, his eyes stopping at our Student Council President, "— trash."

"I will be heading back first. I expect you to follow us through the gate, promptly after," Draneeve continued, the pompous expression he once had nowhere to be seen.

"Why are you bringing that along with us?" Lucas started to say, but his voice ended in a gasp as his eyes bulged out. The arrogance on Lucas' face left him in a second, as he crumpled to his knees, sweat dripping down his face.

"You are but a mere tool. You will do as I say, no questions asked, and if you continue to display this sort of ignorance again, there will be consequences." Draneeve's voice was commanding and sharp, different from how it was when he first revealed himself.

Lucas' face struggled to remain firm as he was clawing where his heart was until Draneeve kicked him, toppling him over on his side.

"Say it!" He growled.

Even from here, I could see Lucas' jaw clenched angrily, but he convulsed and repeated through gritted teeth, "I... am... but... a... mere... tool."

"It is ready, my Lord." One of the robed mages near the anvil announced.

"Hmph." Draneeve proceeded, leaving Lucas heaving, trying to compose himself before getting up.

We all watched as this happened. Even the professors, brave enough to march towards a mage so powerful that he played with a Disciplinary Committee member like he was a ragdoll, were stunned as he crumpled a mage to his knees with just a thought.

Professor Glory was the one to catch on that something was amiss. She pointed

towards Draneeve, who was heading towards the anvil that was now glowing, crying out, "We can't let him leave!"

The four professors rushed through the hole in the barrier when a pillar of fire, as thick as one of the support beams in the academy hall's main entrance, shot up in front of them.

Lucas was still recovering, his face still lined with pain as he looked at the four professors. The desperate expression on his face was now gone, though, as he walked confidently towards the professors, conjuring another pillar of flame using his other hand.

By this time, it was already too late. Draneeve and a group of his robed lackeys were now gone, taking Elijah with them, leaving behind a glowing anvil-shaped object.

"Lucas! How dare a student of this academy be involved in such acts of terrorism?" Professor Glory roared as she imbued mana into both of her swords. The rest of the professors also held up their weapons, the arcane professor already muttering a spell.

A manic grin spread on his face as he started cackling, sounding more like a rabid animal than a man. "How dare I? You think you guys are anywhere near the level I am now at? How dare you speak to me as if you are my equal! You are merely bugs that need to be squashed!" As he spoke, the mana around him began swirling even faster, veins appearing on Lucas' thin, gray arms.

Thus the fight began. The glimmer of hope, that I had now that Draneeve disappeared, faded as I watched my professors get tossed around. The spells Lucas used wasn't special, but the amount of mana he exhibited and the control he had over it was truly terrifying. Simple and obvious implications of multicasting only allowed for each spell that was used in congruence with another to be harder to control and weaker in power.

Even casting two spells at once consisted of essentially splitting your consciousness to mold and manipulate the mana differently. Since Professor Glory focused more of her skills in her swordsmanship with mana augmentation, she could barely initiate three spells while some of the more well-versed professors could cast four spells at once.

Yet, Lucas was easily casting six spells. He was surrounded by a flaming sphere that

shielded him from any of the professor's magic, as four offensive spells had already knocked out the spell formations professor. A two meter flaming knight was fighting on par with Professor Glory, keeping her, who stood as the vanguard, from protecting her teammates. It was cruel to watch as Lucas easily overwhelmed the combined efforts of four professors.

"What are we standing here for, we need to help them!" Curtis voice stirred me from my daze. His clear eyes, shaking with rage and impatience, peered deep into me.

He was right; it was my duty.

I was the leader of the Disciplinary Committee.

I shifted my gaze towards the bell tower. I saw Feyrith and Tessia along with the other students that were captured. I saw Theodore; he could still be alive. We could still save him if we acted now.

Lucas was occupied with the professors and only a few of the robed lackeys stayed behind. It was my duty. Yet, why couldn't I still move? Was my body so deeply entangled in the vine of fear?

"Gah!" A pained cry made all of us turn our heads.

It was Professor Glory.

She was lying on the ground, grasping her side, as a puddle of blood slowly spread from underneath her.

I was reminded of how she looked at me before crossing the barrier. Her eyes told me she knew she could die, but it wasn't a look of resignation, but one of determination. She was definitely afraid, but she was doing what she could in hopes to give the other students here a chance to live.

"You're right." I tore through the shackles that had bound me to my spot and took a step forward. Unsheathing my sword, I locked eyes with Curtis as he got on Grawder, and he gave me a firm nod, his eyes showing the reflecting the same determination that Professor Glory had given me.

I looked for Clive and a few other students I knew who were capable enough to be of use before going through the barrier.

The robed lackeys that were keeping us from escaping had already gone in through the barrier to aid Lucas, so I was able to spot Clive helping some of the professors lead the students away from the area.

Curtis and I, along with a friend from Professor Glory's class, stood as vanguard, with Kathlyn and Clive riding on Grawder.

"D-don't!" I barely managed to hear Professor Glory croak, her eyes wide in fear, when we were attacked by the robed lackeys. They were somehow completely covered under their robes, with even their faces hidden by unnatural shadows. I had just blocked an earthen spike with my blade when another robed figure jumped up from behind me, knocking me down.

Rolling away, I lashed out my sword at the robed man, slicing him where his throat should be. I felt it too... the sensation of my blade on skin. Yet, the robed man neither stopped nor flinched, his gray hands reaching out for me, mana surrounding them.

Just then, Curtis' bond tackled the robed man from the side, knocking him away. "Are you okay, Claire?" Kathlyn extended a hand to help me up after casting a spell to immobilize the enemy, when I heard shrill howl from over where the professors were fighting Lucas.

It was the arcane professor as he was being held up by his neck by the flame guardian Lucas conjured. His neck was steaming as the smell of burnt skin filled the air even all the way here.

As the arcane professor was struggling to free himself, his screams were eventually reduced to throaty gasps as he desperately kicked and thrashed wildly at the fiery knight summoned by Lucas.

I would never forget the look on his face as his body fell limp. I teared my eyes away as the professor's body caught on fire, burning through his clothes and skin as he was cooked alive for everyone to see.

I had to push my desire to run away. Was my choice wrong? I knew that professor. I still remembered the time he showed me a picture he had taken with his three-year-old daughter. I told him it was a waste of money since getting a portrait would've been much cheaper, but he just grinned stupidly, cradling the picture like it was really his child.

What would happen to his family now?

I felt the dire urge to vomit but I was barely able to hold firm. Still, I was dazed enough to almost get hit squarely in the chest by a flame ball shot from another robed man. Barely managing to parry the spell and kicking him away while landing, I used this chance to survey the situation.

It was chaos as the professors that weren't fighting against Lucas were trying their best in leading the remaining students away from this area. Around me, I saw Curtis with Kathlyn riding on top of Grawder.

Over by the bell tower, I spotted Clive, who had just picked up Tessia from the ground, being knocked away by one of the injured mana beast. The other few students that I brought along with me from Professor Glory's class were doing their best against the remaining five robed mages.

To my right were the remaining three professors, about a dozen meters away was Lucas, fighting with the three remaining professors. Among them, Professor Glory was badly injured, her bloody right hand pressed against where her right kidney should be with her free hand barely able to hold onto her sword.

Gritting my teeth, I ran towards where Clive was. I knew what Professor Glory would have wanted me to do. I had to save the students while they were keeping Lucas busy.

Gathering mana into my blade, I picked up speed, muttering a chant.

[Burning Lance]

Spearing the discolored grizzly wolf that had Clive pinned down, I helped him back up when a strong force lurched me off of the ground.

Clive's sharp eyes widened and his lips mouthed my name, but strangely, I couldn't hear a sound.

It wasn't just him; I couldn't hear any sounds.

And that's when I saw a stone spike protrude out of my stomach.

Dropping my sword, I looked down and touched it. There was blood.

My blood.

Suddenly, sounds came back in a barrage, shouts and screams filling my ears.

My eyes glanced back and forth between my bloody hands and the spike coming out of my stomach. I wanted to turn my body around to see what had happened, but I realized my feet were dangling in the air.

Looking down, I could see the giant spike that had skewered me up off of the ground.

I saw Curtis push aside the stunned Clive as he made his way towards me.

“Claire!” I saw Curtis shout, but this time, it just sounded muffled, almost as if I was listening to him from a different room.

Scenes moved slower as I saw Kathlyn jump off Grawder and dash towards me, both of her hands covering her mouth in shock.

Kathlyn’s voice was the same inaudible, muffled noise that only differed in pitch from Curtis’ voice.

I tried to say something, but all that I could manage was a wet gurgle.

I thought of my father. His firm gaze. His eyes that drooped slightly from age. He had been the one who told me the importance the Bladeheart name represented. Would he be proud if he saw me now?

Just as I felt everything fading, I heard it, a blood-curdling roar piercing through the heavens.

It was a deep, rumbling thunder that shook the ground and the spike that was lodged through me, with it. Even in the brink of death that I was in, I still somehow felt fear. It wasn’t the sort of fear that kept me from moving like earlier, but one that made my body want to instinctively bow in reverence.

In this state of near death, I thought for a moment that I had somehow hallucinated this sound, but then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw it.

The unmistakable figure of a winged beast that every adventurer—every person—had once hoped to catch a glimpse of.

It was a dragon.

It was nothing remotely close to anything from the drawings my mother showed me in books to scare me as a child. No, this dragon made those look cute in comparison.

With two horns protruding from each side of its sharp head and iridescent eyes that could freeze even a veteran adventurer, it was a manifestation of both sovereignty and ferocity. While most of the books I have read as a child described a dragon's scales to precious shiny jewels, this dragon's scales were such a rich, opaque black that it seemed to make its shadow look gray in comparison.

But as impressive and awe-inspiring as the dragon, that looked to be the size of a small house, was, what made my heart truly tremble in fear was the boy below it.

It was the boy with the unmistakable auburn hair and familiar uniform; each step he took, he walked with the most subtle, faint, yet solid confidence I had ever seen.

And seeping from his very pores was a rage so blatantly uncontained that I could only fear for whoever it was directed to. The very air seemed to avoid his presence as the earth beneath him crumbled under his might.

All of a sudden, I couldn't help but let out a choked laugh at how foolish I was for comparing him to Lucas. As my senses dimmed, my only thought was relief that I wouldn't have to witness what he would do to those that crossed his path.

My only regret was not being able to see Lucas' expression of defeat at the end.

Chapter 95

The Calm Before

LUCAS WYKES' POV:

Staring down at the professors - the very mages that I strove to become - struggling to stand back up, it was clear to me that their lives were in my hands. With my newfound powers, these so-called “elites” were now nothing more than ants to me.

Enhanced cognitive processing capabilities for higher levels of spell casting.

A nearly unlimited pool of mana for me to access and utilize.

Heightened reflexes along with strengthened physical prowess and dexterity.

The elixir that Draneeve had given me really fulfilled its purpose. Just like he had promised, it truly brought forth my full potential.

It was obvious since early on that I was a gifted mage, however, being outshined by my older brother, Bairon, my accomplishments were never able to satisfy my family's expectations. I had lived my childhood chasing after his insurmountable shadow, but no longer; I felt like I had finally surpassed him.

Easily wiping out the distinguished professors of this academy, it felt like I had actually transcended the realm of mortals, incomparable to even the highest of human, elven, and dwarven mages.

...so why am I feeling this way?

This feeling of an icy claw gripping my innards, slowly twisting, slowly freezing my insides.

The palpable pressure in the air seemed to make the force of gravity in the vicinity stronger as he approached.

Beads of cold sweat began forming, drenching my clothes, as I had unknowingly taken

a step back.

Was I afraid?

That's impossible.

With my newfound powers, I was invincible. I was all-powerful. I was perfect.

"Welcome to the party, Arthur. You're just in time," I jeered, satisfied with the calm timbre of my voice.

He said nothing as he continued his way towards me at a suspensefully slow pace.

My gaze shifted from Arthur to the obsidian dragon behind him. I had read in a book that the dragon race had already gone extinct from being hunted down. I would normally be more taken aback, but at this point, compared to the terrifying intensity emanating from Arthur, his dragon looked no more threatening than a common lizard.

His steps never faltered, never swayed, as he approached the bell tower. I couldn't make out what sort of expression he had, his eyes were covered by his bangs.

The atmosphere was deathly silent, as even the senseless mana beasts that Draneeve controlled instinctively knew to prostrate in submission.

"Impressive pet. Did you think it could help you now? Look around you! All of this, it was done by me! The professors that were so highly regarded? I stepped on them like disease-ridden pests," I chuckled, taking a few steps toward the boy I once regarded my equal.

The dragon behind him let out a deafening roar that made the surrounding audience wince in fear, but I didn't.

No. As much as I hated to admit, it wasn't the dragon that gave me this feeling of unease; it was Arthur.

Unaffected by my taunts, he wordlessly made his way towards me.

Some of the students had already defeated Draneeve's minions, only a few mana beasts remained on my side. However, they were petrified in fear; whether that was due to Arthur or the Dragon, I will never know.

As he got closer, it dawned on me...

He wasn't even looking at me. His gaze was never directed at me!

My feet stayed glued to the ground, stunned, as he simply strode past, ignoring me and everyone else here.

How dare he!

I could easily crush him right now; he should be pleading, begging for me to spare him and his friends.

But instead, he had the audacity to treat me like air?

My fists began trembling from how hard they were clenched.

Passing by everyone else he knew, disregarding his dying or dead peers and friends, Arthur knelt down in front of the elf princess; his dragon craned its neck down towards her as well, and for that long breath of a moment, there was only silence.

Knowing exactly what to do, my lips curled up into a smirk. Let's see him ignore me now.

"She was crying for you, you know," I taunted.

No reaction.

"Oh sure, she stayed strong at first. It made it all the more satisfying seeing her break down," I chuckled.

His shoulders twitched a bit.

His dragon looked back at me, its eyes piercing me with the ferocity that might've frightened me before.

"You see, I wanted to play with your little elf princess more, but Draneeve told me not to lay a hand on her. I was going to disagree at first but an idea struck me; what better way to break you than for you to lay helplessly on the ground as you watch me defile the girl you love so much?" My laugh echoed throughout the academy as everyone else watched, unable to even muster up the courage to utter a word.

The dragon let out a grunt and looked like it was about to charge at me when it abruptly stopped.

My face twitched in rage as Arthur continued to wordlessly cling onto his little elf lover. He still chose to ignore me?

“ARTHUR LEYWIN! YOU DARE IGNORE ME?” I roared. “You think you’re so much better than me? Let me see you go easy on me now! I’ll break every bone in your body so you could only cry helplessly as I desecrate Tessia right—”

My words got caught in my throat as the ground abruptly splintered and crumpled underneath Arthur like a sheet of paper, making me stumble.

I regained my balance and looked back up at Arthur, whose back was still facing me as he gently laid the elf princess down. All of a sudden, I was hit with the same sensation as earlier— the frigid, emotionless grip of a demon, twisting at my insides, wringing the air out of my lungs.

As if the wind had been knocked out of me, air escaped my throat as choppy and shallow gasps.

Unable to compose myself, I looked down at my hands to see that they were trembling.

I realized it wasn’t just my hands but my whole body shuddering uncontrollably from the very core.

What was happening to my body? Why was I reacting this way towards some boy my age? It should be impossible for him to be stronger than me, yet, what was this sense of—

He turned around.

I would never have thought that something so simple as eye contact could be so terrifying, when his pale blue eyes, sharp as a knife met mine, I felt all of the remaining air in my lungs get sucked out.

And suddenly, I realized what I had been feeling the entire time; the word to describe the emotions that I couldn’t grasp...

No! I refuse to admit this!

I ignored the inaudible scream of protest deep in my mind that was begging me to flee; to escape in the opposite direction from him.

“Oh, am I finally worthy of your attention?” I spat out mockingly, struggling to keep my body from trembling.

“Lucas.” Arthur was a peasant who had such a banal background that his existence would normally amount to less than a retired mule, while I was born into the Wykes family, which birthed the most talented of mages this continent had seen. Yet, his voice rang with such glaring authority that it made me almost kneel on impulse.

“I thought of you as nothing more than a mere wasp that I regarded unnecessary to kill,” Arthur continued with a chill edge to his voice as he once again began walking towards me.

“But even the holiest of saints will swat it down, without hesitation, if said wasp so much as dared to sting him.” His cold, emotionless eyes, empty and frozen, never broke contact with mine as a tangible bloodlust gripped at my limbs like shackles.

He was comparing me to a bug. No, he truly saw me as a bug. Yet, any words of rebuttal or protest refused to leave my mouth.

Why...?

It wasn't supposed to be like this. My powers should now be greater than his. So why was this happening? How could a boy a year younger frighten me more than Draneeve? How many legions of men and beasts did he have to murder in order to possess such suffocating, oppressive killing intent?

Even the very earth seemed heedful of Arthur as the ground sunk down with each step he took.

My heart pounded harder and harder against my ribcage as if it wanted to break out and escape. My vision blurred as cold beads of sweat rolled down from my forehead into my eyes.

Tearing my gaze away from Arthur, I focused on Tessia. The dragon had curled up protectively around the elf princess, leaving me no opening to make use of her.

Silently, as Arthur advanced closer, I saw it. In his eyes was a raging tempest, so hungry

to create mayhem, just barely contained.

I am Lucas Wykes, second-born of Otis Vayhur Wykes! Elite mages of Xyrus Academy have been brought to their knees by my overwhelming strength. Arthur was nothing but a lowly peasant, his only luck was being born with a decent talent for magic!

My mind snapped into a state of desperation and frenzy as I fought down the burning desire to run. Him, scare me? Never. I would rather die than plead for my life.

Chapter 96

The Storm

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

Tessia was okay...

Bruises and scrapes were visible on her smooth, pale skin. Thankfully they were only surface wounds.

She was okay.

It seemed like she was drugged with an anesthetic to keep her unconscious temporarily...

Yes, this was better. That way, she wouldn't have to be awake for all of this...

She wouldn't have to witness what I was about to do.

'Sylvie, protect Tess. I'll be enough to handle him,' I reassured my bond.

This was my fault. I was a fool for letting Lucas live this long. This world had made me soft.

My head continued to pound as I walked towards Lucas.

Nothing else mattered. Not now. Not until I took care of the pest.

"S-Stay back!" Lucas stammered, a crazed look visible in his eyes.

He prepared a spell as he retreated. I wonder if he'd realized that his spells were in fact eating away at his lifeforce. It didn't matter; I'd kill him before he did himself.

[Hell's Rain]

He released his spell as dozens of flaming orbs scattered and floated around, growing increasingly larger.

He continued to grin madly as his body visibly withered at the burden of the spell. The red flaming spheres turned blue as he further refined his magic.

It seemed as though he was planning on taking not just me, but half the school down with him.

‘Papa...’ Sylvie’s worried voice echoed in my mind.

‘It’s fine.’

I could let him kill himself with his own spell right now, but he didn’t deserve that; that would be too merciful a death for him. I needed him alive, at least until I got some answers.

I wanted to destroy him instantly, but the attack, the whole disaster, couldn’t have been done by Lucas alone. Someone had to have forcibly overexerted his mana core— to the point where even if I didn’t kill him now, he would probably die on his own.

Whatever it was he had taken made it possible for him to convert his lifeforce into mana, thus draining him of his vitality; by the odd discoloration of his skin and the mana beasts present was too much of a coincidence to not assume that it had something to do with the Vritras.

“By the look on your face, it seems you don’t know what’s about to happen. Do you think you could come out of this alive?” Lucas hissed, drooling from the side of his mouth.

“Die!” he spat, releasing his spell.

The dozens of flaming blue orbs, each capable of burning down a building, shot towards me like cannonballs.

I let out a crisp breath and muttered, “Second Phase.”

[Dragon’s Awakening]

My vision shifted into monochrome, the only colors I could register being the particles of mana.

[Absolute Zero]

The very air seemed to freeze as a curtain of white flame erupted around me before I was bombarded with Lucas' spell.

I didn't have much time left in my second phase before the recoil hit. I needed answers before that happened.

As the cloud of steam and debris began to clear, I could make out Lucas' figure, the deranged look on his face wiped clean, replaced by one of utter shock.

"H-How is that p-possible? N-No, it wasn't supposed to be like this. How are you suddenly able to use ice-attribute magic?" he babbled, as if he had just seen a ghost.

Relentless, Lucas began chanting another spell, which surprisingly, by the amount of mana gathered in his right hand, was more powerful than the one prior.

"CREATION FORM!"

[Infernal Lance]

It was a type of spell I'd never seen before. As mana congregated, it manifested into a flaming blue partisan spear. What amazed me was that the mana particles hadn't simply formed the shape of a spear, but instead seemed to have transmuted into an actual burning spear.

"I hope you survive this one too. That way, you can watch as I make your precious princess a true woman!" he jeered, launching the flaming spear.

[Black Thunder]

I shot out a condensed bolt of electricity with my right hand, while catching the shaft of Lucas' spear with my left.

My arm lurched back from the force as an audible hiss resounded from the cloud of steam that rose due to the mesh of fire and ice.

"Gahhh!" Lucas' shrill howl pierced through my ears. "My arm! It hurts! My arm!" he screamed.

I continued walking towards Lucas who was still pawing at the empty space where his left arm used to be.

“White Fire!” I roared, and my left hand ignited in a pearl-colored flame.

I was less than a foot away from Lucas as he continued to back away from me. “Defile? Make into a woman?” I recited through gritted teeth.

“This... this isn’t fair! L-Lightning magic? You’re a q-quadra-elemental...” Lucas’ voice trailed off as he stared in disbelief, his lips trembling as he noticed my lightning-clad arm.

“Yes, I am.”

Lucas’ bloodcurdling scream tore through the air as I gripped his remaining arm. The flame surrounding my left hand began to spread, slowly freezing his arm down to the very molecules.

Tightening my grip, his arm shattered like glass as Lucas stared at the crumbling shards of what used to be his left arm.

“N-No... How dare you! I’m Lucas Wykes!” he spat out as fell weakly on his behind, his legs pushing away from me

Kicking him to his back, he gave me a venomous glare, any trace of sanity gone. Placing my foot on his right leg, I pinned him down.

He wasn’t a human anymore. Not at this point.

[Downforce]

“GAHHHHH!”

Lucas spat out a mouthful of blood, his leg crumpled into a mess of crimson. Shattered bone fragments dotted the pool of red as it seeped through the cracks in the ground made by the increased gravitational force of my augmented foot.

Another bone splitting crunch echoed through the surrounding atmosphere, before a shrill howl of pain promptly followed as I did the same to his other leg.

Just like how the Vritra had left Alea, limbless and slowly dying, inside the depths of a dungeon, it was only befitting to do the same to someone so vile.

Picking Lucas up by the scruff of his uniform, I slapped his face to get his attention. “Who was responsible for all of this?” I asked.

As his glossy eyes met mine, his expression deformed into a scowl before he spat blood at my face.

“You think you’ll get any sort of answers from me? Puahaha! I’ll tell you this, though! That incompetent fool you call your best friend, he’s gone! They took him away to who knows where! I’ll bet he’s dead already! Hahah—” I dropped him on the ground. “—Ugh!”

I had been so worried about Tessia that it hadn’t registered in my mind— the fact that Elijah had been caught up in all of this as well. I lifted my gaze as I scanned my surroundings for the first time since I had arrived. I could see the numerous students and professors peering at me with the unmistakable expression of fear. Yet, out of all of those faces, Elijah really was nowhere to be seen.

“WHERE DID THEY TAKE ELIJAH!” I roared out, hoping someone—anyone—would answer.

“They went through there,” a hoarse voice spoke out— it was Clive. He pointed to an odd anvil-shaped contraption that had an abnormal amount of mana particles fluctuating in and around it.

“Who was it that took him?”

“A mage that called himself Draneeve,” Clive replied, picking himself up.

Was it a portal? Were my suspicions correct? Did the mastermind behind this really come from the Continent of Alacrya?

“It doesn’t matter. He’s probably dead, anyways. And so will be the rest of you, when he comes back!” Lucas snickered as blood continued to leak from his two crippled legs.

Looking at Lucas, a talented mage raised with the notion that his worth only amounted to his strength, who was glaring at me with neither guilt nor remorse for his actions and betrayal, I couldn’t help but pity him. Almost.

Lucas could’ve truly tortured and defiled Tessia if I had arrived too late. His earlier words still rang in my mind, haunting me with images of what could’ve happened if I

hadn't made it in time.

I placed my foot between his mangled legs at the only extremity left on his body besides his head; the only place he could have any sort of attachment to.

"W-What are you doing?" His voice was tinged with a trace of fear.

I looked him dead in the eye and responded with what only seemed appropriate, "Taking measures to ensure your filth won't spread to the next generation."

His eyes widened at the impending realization as the stubs of his arms flailed. He opened his mouth to say something but...

"May your suffering last onto your next life," I recited indifferently.

[Downforce]

Chapter 97

Outcome

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

The firm, mana-imbued stamp of my foot against Lucas' pelvic region created a cacophony of snapping bones, squelching flesh, and splintering gravel, accompanied by a mind-numbing shrill screech.

At this point, Lucas, an accomplice that was responsible for so much havoc and death; the one that drove me to this point, was now nothing more than a dying body. His mouth was frothing, with only the whites of his eyes showing, as he continuously mumbled incoherently. I lifted my leg up from the blood-soaked pomace of the one that dared to harm those dear to me, and once again, I was glad that Tess was asleep for all of this.

The disaster that had befallen was over. The perpetrator that had killed three professors and was responsible for the death of so many more was now fatally wounded, slowly dying.

Yet, no one rejoiced. There was still fear in everyone's eyes, except, where it was once directed towards Lucas, it was now directed towards me. In the midst of this silence was a palpable tension radiating from everyone present, student and staff.

It had been a long time since I received stares like these. I relished it then, priding myself in my domineering strength, but now, only a helpless sigh escaped my lips.

A searing pain spread throughout my body as I was forcibly reverted out of second phase. My hair shortened as my long, silvery-white hair changed back to its normal short, auburn shade. The runes that ran down my arms and back faded as my vision returned to normal, although strained.

The recoil hit me a lot less this time than when I went up against the Elderwood Guardian. Although I didn't pass out, I hadn't used my mana very efficiently. While trying to make a statement, I used gravity magic which strained me since, without the help of my beast will, I normally wouldn't be able to use it.

Still, I was barely able to keep my body from toppling over as I lifted my hand to deliver the final blow, when a sudden piercing ring interrupted me, drawing my, and everyone else's, attention.

The red-tinted barrier that surrounded the school shattered from above. The broken fragments of the barrier fluttered down, reflecting the vibrancy of the Aurora Constellation, that was almost in full bloom, in the night sky; the bloodstained academy instantly turned into a scene from a fairytale.

Descending amongst the shimmering rain of the broken barrier shards were three figures. Even before I could make out their identities, the terrifying pressure that they radiated told me exactly who they were.

The Lances.

"...ther," a strained, gurgled gasp escaped from Lucas.

With my attention focused on the Lances, I didn't realize he had gained enough awareness to speak.

Looking down, I noticed Lucas' eyes fixed on where the Lances were; he spoke again, this time more distinctly.

"B-Brother..."

Before I could even react to what he had said, a sudden surge of light struck me in the chest, barreling me straight into the bell tower with such force that I broke through the mana-enforced wall, buried underneath the rubble.

Vomiting up blood, and what felt like my intestines, I tried pulling myself out, but it felt as if my entire body was glued against the wall. Confused and disoriented, I tried to make out, with my blur vision, the one who casted the spell.

It was one of the Lances. I wasn't able to make out much more than his indistinct figure through my unfocused eyes, but before he was able to fire another shot, I caught sight of Sylvie unleashing a blast of fire at him.

'Sylvie, no. You can't fight them,' I called out to her, my voice sounding weak even in my head, but it was too late. He blocked the blast like it was a toy ball before one of the other Lances trapped Sylvie in a dome of ice.

Even though every bone in my body felt like it was getting sawed in half and my head felt as if it had been punctured repeatedly, I was able to make a bit more sense of what was happening.

From her modestly curved figure and long white hair, the Lance that had trapped Sylvie in the cage of ice was female, and from the looks of it, Sylvie wasn't able to break or melt it. Despite the position I was in, I couldn't help but be relieved that she had been only caged. It sure as hell beat the other options that the Lance could've chosen.

Meanwhile, the Lance that had attacked me had kneeled down beside Lucas. He seemed to be fairly young—maybe in his late twenties—and looking closely at his face, from the high-bridged, straight nose up to his narrow eyes, there was a very distinct resemblance to Lucas.

The last, much older, Lance didn't waste any time to gather and organize the remaining students and professors. He was already interviewing some of the students, nodding in response to them and turning his head to look at me.

Whether it was because of how disoriented I was, or of how worried I was for Sylvie, it took me until now to piece it all together: Lucas had called out 'brother' to the Lance that attacked me...

Before I could even curse at my own bad luck, the Lance I could only assume to be Lucas' brother stormed towards me as his body released a torrent of yellow lightning.

"Death is not enough for the you. To do something so atrocious to a Wykes, to my brother..." He didn't speak loudly, in fact, it almost sounded calm, yet his voice carried an alarming clarity that felt as if he had spoken directly into my ear. A storm of electricity trailed around him, dancing like restless cobras craving to be released as he made his way towards me.

I tried to move my body, but after a few desperate struggles, I realized I had been essentially crucified to the wall by what seemed like electromagnetism.

Despite the situation, I couldn't help but praise the amount of control he had over lightning. For him, there was no need to concentrate on manipulating mana into lightning like I had to. Lightning simply bent and danced to his will like it was another limb on his body. Turning my gaze towards Sylvie, who was still desperately trying to escape from the ice cage, and back to the lightning-clad Lance, I finally realized just

what white core mages were capable of.

“Bairon, you are not to lay a hand on him,” the older Lance ordered as he finished talking with one of the professors.

“Hah?” Bairon turned his head over his shoulder to look back. “That boy tormented and humiliated my brother before killing him, Olfred, and you’re saying that I am not to harm him? Do you wish to go against me as well?” The coils of lightning surrounding Bairon thickened, obliterating anything they touched.

“The boy was the one who saved everyone here from your brother. And since when did you grow enough hair on your balls to think that you could challenge me?” the man named Olfred spat back.

I used this chance to try and shift back into second phase, hoping I could gather enough strength to at least escape, but it was useless. My body wasn’t even able to gather mana at this point.

Turning my attention back to the two Lances, I could tell that Bairon was visibly confused. Still, whether it was because of his pride or his doubt, he chose to persist. “Do not test me, Olfred. I am in no mood to participate in your folly. My brother died in my arms; it is only just that I do what his killer did to him.” He whipped his head, glaring back at me with pure venom in his eyes.

Bairon began making his way towards me again when suddenly, two coal-black knights erected from the ground beside him, pinning him down.

“Olfred!” Bairon roared as he struggled in the grasps of the two knights that seemed unaffected by the lightning surrounding him.

Bairon suddenly unleashed a shockwave, knocking away the two stone knights before he charged towards Olfred, lightning manifested around his flattened hand, turning it into a crackling lance. Olfred had already turned his entire right arm into a gauntlet of hardened lava, but just as the two were about to exchange blows, the female Lance appeared between them.

“Enough.” Instantly, both Bairon and Olfred were trapped up to their necks in a coffin of ice. There was no gradual decrease in temperature of the air or water in the atmosphere to trigger the freezing process. The space around the two Lances simply froze, and despite the gauntlet of lava surrounding Olfred’s right arm, the ice didn’t

even hiss or steam.

“Bairon, you are not the one who can make this decision. It is up to the Council to determine what to do with the boy... and the dragon,” she said, not a tinge of emotion in her voice, to the degree that Kathlyn suddenly seemed like the protagonist in a soap opera in comparison. Even as she stared at my giant obsidian dragon, there was no emotion; she regarded her as something akin to a lamp post.

Assuming that the two had cooled down, the female Lance dissipated the coffin of ice, when Bairon suddenly whipped around and shot a bullet of lightning directly at me, but was immediately blocked by an ice wall conjured with a swift motion of her hand. Fluidly, the female lance swung her arm towards Bairon’s neck, during which a thin sword of ice manifested in her hand, drawing a crisp arc as she slashed at his neck; just deep enough to draw blood, while she kept her blade pressed against Bairon’s throat.

“Insubordination will not be tolerated,” she said tersely as ice slowly spread from the tip of her blade onto his neck.

By this time, I had already given up on escaping. If I had thought that me shifting into second phase gave me a chance at running away, I rescinded that statement as I watched the female Lance manhandle the other two with frightening speed.

Bairon eventually relented, not missing the chance to give me one more deathly glare.

I won’t lie, I might’ve winked back at him.

After less than an hour, the Lances had gathered enough information from the witnesses to piece together what exactly had happened. This granted me the privilege of being graciously unmagnetised by Bairon and, instead, having my legs and arms shackled together cuffs of ice. I found the chance, during that time, to tell her that the dragon was my bond, which, for the first time since seeing her, she had a change in expression: a slight raise in her left brow. She freed Sylvie from the cage as soon as she transformed back into her miniature fox form and was chained to my shackles as well.

After leaving me, guarded by one of Olfred’s summoned knights, Bairon and the female Lance worked to completely destroy the barrier, as the older Lance gathered all of the students and professors with the help of his other ten summoned knights.

I couldn’t help but admire the barrier that covered the school. It was very well-

devised, seeing as to how it allowed access, but restricted everyone from going back out; moreover, the Lances had to break the barrier first, which meant that it most likely had a restriction as to who was allowed to enter.

Tessia, as well as all of the other captives, were still unconscious during the whole ordeal. Eventually, after the two of them completely destroyed the barrier, a team of mages sent by the Adventurer's Guild and Mage's Guild hurriedly made their way to the scene, promptly healing all of those who needed immediate attention and taking away everyone who had been injured to a medical facility.

It was chaos; sobbing families of the students involved, people that looked like reporters furiously scribbling into their notebooks, and noisy bystanders all gathered around the front gate of the academy, hoping to get a better glimpse of what had happened.

Fortunately, the two guilds had taken precautionary measures to make sure that no one came too close to the academy at some point. There were gates erected all around the campus to keep anyone from trespassing, as uniformed guards were stationed every few meters or so.

Forced to stay behind until further instructions were given, I made sure to keep close to the female Lance so that Bairon had no way of launching another quick attack at me.

“ARTHUR!”

I whip my head to find the source of the familiar voice. After a few moments of looking around, I found my family waving at me from behind the gates. Even from this distance, the look of concern was visibly etched onto the faces of my parents as my father even tried to jump over the gate, only to get held down by one of the guards.

I could tell my sister had been crying as she was clutching onto the sleeve of my mother. Next to her was Vincent and Tabitha who, I assumed, were searching for their daughter.

“Am I allowed to talk to my family?” I asked the female Lance, my voice coming out a lot more feeble than I expected.

Bairon immediately replied, “After what you did to my brother, you think you have the right to make requests like—”

“Boy, I’ll take you to your family,” Olfred interrupted. I didn’t have the strength or the freedom in my limbs to properly walk, so Olfred’s summon had to carry me there. Being held over the shoulder like a sack of rice wasn’t exactly the way I wanted to appear in front of the crowds of people present, but I was in no position to say otherwise.

The summoned knight let me down surprisingly gentle in front of my family. Olfred stood behind me, turning his back; whether he did that out of courtesy or out of caution that Bairon might shoot at us both from the back, I frankly didn’t need to know.

There was a tense moment of silence as they stared at me, unable find the right words. Taking a look at my body, I cursed under my breath. I had dried blood crusted around my mouth and clothes from when I had vomited blood, and both of my feet were dyed in a crimson red. My clothes were in tatters and I was as pale as I felt; all in all, I looked like a homeless vampire that had just feasted on someone and then proceeded to dance in their pool of blood.

“Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad. Hi, Ellie.” I tried to smile, but that seemed to make them even more worried.

“Arthur, my baby, a-are you okay?” My mother stretched her arm through the fence and I gripped her hand

“Son, what happened in there?” my father asked, worry creased into his furrowed brows.

“I’m fine, Mom. I’ve seen better days, but I’ll be okay with a bit of rest. Even I don’t know everything myself, Dad.” I shook my head, tightening my grip on my mother’s hand to reassure her.

I turned my gaze to Ellie, who was still looking at me with an expression that still seemed to be deciding whether to be angry, sad, or relieved.

“Why are you cuffed?” my father spoke again, his eyes on the transparent shackles that bound my feet and hands to each other.

I didn’t know how to respond. I didn’t want to simply tell them I had killed someone and was probably going to be under investigation. My father might understand, but I didn’t want to have to say it in front of Mother and Ellie.

As I was looking for the words to properly explain, I noticed the female Lance approaching with an open scroll in her hands.

I stood back up awkwardly due to the shackles binding my feet to face the female Lance.

Without making eye contact, she began reading out of the scroll. “Arthur Leywin, son of Reynolds and Alice Leywin. The Council has decreed that, due to your recent actions of excessive violence and the inconclusive circumstances involved, your mana core will be restrained, your title as a mage will be stripped, and you will be incarcerated until further judgment.”

The crinkled sound as she rolled up the communication scroll echoed through my mind, clearly audible despite the massive crowd gathered around me. She finally looked up to meet my gaze. “...Effective immediately.”



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